The King and his Knight

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The King and his Knight

by Anonymous

Summary

Will has just become King of Vilspastai, following the death of his father. Despite the era of peace his father ushered in, Will is faced with a multitude of challenges as his kingdom's first ever male omega ruler. Marriage offers, treason, heirs, and political unrest are all thrust upon the new king almost as soon as he ascends the throne. Thankfully, Will is not alone in his troubles, thanks to his allies, and his personal knight, Hannibal.

Prince Will

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will watched from the north tower as a sea of carriages carrying regally dressed guests inched along one by one at his palace's front gate. In less than a day, it would be the year anniversary of his father, King Madadh's, death. The King was in an advanced age when Will was born, and had lived to be quite old for a male alpha. He had been beloved by his people and his allies, and had turned Vilspastai from a small, powerless country, into one of the five diamonds of Draigoch. Its coastal towns and island excursions had become tourist attractions, while its deep and ancient forests and rivers brought explorers and men of science from all throughout the lands. Will's father had created a golden era for Vilspastai, and now it was up to Will, the sole remaining heir, to continue that era.

"Penny for your thoughts, your majesty?"

A deep, richly accented voice suddenly broke through Will's thoughts, but Will did not startle. He recognized the voice, it was one he had heard almost every day for the last 25 years.

"Hannibal. I see there's still no hiding from you, even on days like today."

Will turned his attention away from the large, floor to ceiling windows of the tower to face the staircase landing. Hannibal stood on the last step, looking more regal and less rugged than what was normal for him. A result of the day's events, Will assumed.

Hannibal's lips smiled, but his smile did not reach his eyes. "It is my job to find you through any amount of chaos."

Will sighed wistfully. "Serves me right trying to beat your nose after so many years. You could probably find me through eighty layers of stone brick."

This time, the lines beside Hannibal's maroon eyes crinkled up a bit along with his lips. "I'll bet ninety layers."

Hannibal, apart from all other members of his castle staff, was the only one who dared banter with the prince like this. It was a right reserved not because Hannibal was his bodyguard, but because the two had grown up together.

When Will was very young, so young that he could hardly remember anything before the day, it became apparent that he was presenting as an omega. As a male omega, Will was already a rarity. The number of alphas and omegas had been slowly dwindling over the last few generations, and within the last century, for the first time ever, betas became the majority.

According to scientists newly hired in royal courts across Draigoch, the secondary alpha and omega sexes were a holdover from humanity's primal ancestors, and as humanity evolved,

they were slowly losing those traits that no longer served their survival. Most of them estimated that within 500 years, alphas and omegas would make up just 10% of the population, or possibly less.

Even back in his grandparents time, male omegas were prized. Alphas and omegas take up equal parts of the population, and alpha males outnumber alpha females five to one, but omega females outnumber omega males one hundred to one. Now that betas took up 45% of the population, Will's classification was even rarer.

To the untrained eye, one might struggle to tell a male alpha apart from an in-shape male beta, or a beta female for an omega female, or even an alpha female for a slightly tall beta female. But, there was absolutely no mistaking a male omega. Unlike male alphas and betas, who would leave puberty with plentiful muscle mass, abundant body hair, and rougher skin; male omegas carried themselves into adulthood with a uniquely feminine beauty and grace.

Male omegas are noticeably smaller than male betas and especially male alphas. Like all omegas, their frames are lithe and elegant, their skin is soft, their hairline doesn't recede, and they grow very little facial or body hair. Then, unlike female omegas, they have features that are their own. They have penises and testes instead of vaginas, but unlike a male beta or alpha penis, the omega male's penis is smaller, roughly three inches on average, as are the testes, which do not produce any sperm during orgasm. Omega males also have flat chests, which only inflate by the tiniest bit during lactation periods. Their vocal chords still thicken like beta and alpha males, giving them a voice that could be just as deep and rich as any masculine voice, but always with a lilt of something else. Something sweet, and calming. The voice of an omega.

Throughout recorded history, male omegas have become icons of art and high society. They have been stage actors, musicians, muses, scribes, priests, concubines, and princes. It was more rare for them to become kings, as they were usually married into royalty instead of born into it, due to their rarity. That was another element to Will's miraculous existence. He was one of only a handful of male omega royals throughout history who received the title through blood, not marriage. He was set to be Vilspastai's first omega King.

When his father realized the gem his son truly was, he grew terrified that other kingdoms and members of aristocracy would see Will not as a future king, but as a future pawn to be won. A future son in law, a future concubine, a future father to children and grandchildren. Having a male omega as part of a family's bloodline created a sort of invisible pedigree for that family, especially considering how much harder it was for male omegas to conceive compared to omega females and beta females. While beta females on average gave birth to 5-7 children in their lifetime, and omega females (when paired with an alpha) averaged 16-18 children, male omegas rarely made it to the end of their lifetime having given birth to even one child.

The womb on a beta female or omega female was set right at the end of the vagina, usually only 4-6 inches deep. For beta females, they experience a period of fertility for roughly 5 days out of a month. Female omegas tend to have 3-4 heats in a year, and can get pregnant at any time throughout the course of a heat with a beta male or alpha in rutt. Male omega's,

however, have wombs that sit much deeper, and they only go into heat once every two to three years.

That was Will's final miracle, the final piece to his miraculously rare existence, and one that his father had made him promise to guard closely.

Secondary sexes were not the only thing slowly disappearing from humanity in each new generation. Humanity had been losing another element of their primal past for much longer. So long in fact, that in ancient times it was hardly written about, and in modern times, affected less than 1% of the alpha and omega population.

Scientists claim that many hundreds of thousands of years ago, omegas and alphas went through heats and rutts with much greater frequency than they do today, so much so that they theorize society would never have been able to progress if rutts and heats didn't come fewer and farther between. This part of human history might have never been discovered, if it wasn't for the fact that some omegas and alphas still undergo rutts and heats with the same frequency as their prehistoric ancestors.

Since the gene that causes these increased periods of fertility is so recessive, those that manage to present in this fashion are referred to as "recessive" omegas and "recessive" alphas. While it isn't entirely unheard of for one or two alphas or omegas to be born with this active recessive gene in a year, it is almost entirely unheard of for a male omega to be recessive. So unheard of, in fact, that some scholars believed it to be entirely impossible for male omegas to carry the gene.

That was, until Will followed up his first pseudo-heat with a second one just three and a half months later. And then another one two months after that. It was soon discovered that Will averaged 5-6 heats in a year, just higher than the average number of heats a non-recessive female omega has in a year. A thorough and newly invented blood-test later confirmed it, Will was the first verifiable male recessive omega in history.

It was this event that led to King Madadh seeking out a bodyguard for his son and only heir. If any neighboring kingdom or luxuriously rich alpha heard that the Prince of Vilspastai was a recessive omega, the King could easily envision his small country being swallowed up in an invasion to steal him away, a fate which had befallen several recessive female omega princesses throughout history.

First, the King had all of Will's medical documents sealed away. Then, he had the court scientists and doctors swear to secrecy by threat of execution. Lastly, he found Hannibal.

King Madadh didn't just want to hire anyone for the job of Will's protector. He needed Will's bodyguard to value Will's life more than their own life, or even the lives of their friends or family. They needed to revere Will not just as a prince and future king, but as their own personal deity. It would require an amount of conditioning that couldn't be performed on an adult knight.

Will still remembered when his father introduced him to Hannibal. He was five years old, and had just presented as a recessive omega in the year prior. His father told him he had someone to introduce, and after being gone for a few minutes, King Madadh re-entered the room with

an older child. The older child had ash brown hair and a hard look in his maroon eyes that barely concealed a mind that was much darker and more weathered than his age would suggest. Will remembered being unimpressed as his father knelt down between them, and introduced the older child as Hannibal, Will's personal bodyguard. Will was unsure how one child could protect another child, but he trusted his father's judgment, and reached out a hand to shake Hannibal's like he had seen so many adults do as a greeting.

The young Hannibal had stared down at Will's small hand, and then at King Madadh, who smiled at the older child before turning his attention back to his son.

"Will, Hannibal is not from here. He doesn't know much of our language, or our customs. Since he'll be training to protect you, you should teach him some of our culture as well."

Will didn't know much of Vilspastai culture, but he was willing to try anything if his father requested it, and so the young prince reached out and grabbed Hannibal's hand. He shook their hands together and smiled up at the other child.

"This is called a handshake, it's a way to say hello."

Hannibal had stared down at their joined hands with widened eyes for a few seconds, before glancing at the King, and then finally at Will. He finally returned the prince's handshake, and spoke with a thick accent as he said, "Hello, your…. majesty."

All at once, the memory of Hannibal as a child faded away before Will's eyes, replaced by his adult figure at the other end of the tower room.

Hannibal approached Will, taking up his usual position on the prince's left side as he looked out into the palace courtyard, watching as it filled with more and more of Draigoch's upper classes.

"I don't believe I've ever seen so many guests. Not even on your father's seventieth birthday."

Hannibal still possessed a small tinge of an accent, but his speech was otherwise indistinguishable from any other member of a royal palace. In fact, the accent made him sound even more imposing, if that was at all possible.

"I know, I hate it."

Hannibal huffed a laugh at Will's obvious disgruntlement. "It's only for today and tomorrow, then they will leave, and you can enjoy your solitude once again."

Will scoffed. "Hardly. Once this event is over, I'll have even more suitors wailing outside the palace gates for me to hear their soliloquy or epic poem inspired by the color of my eyes or the sound of my voice. The only difference now is that I will be expected to hear them out."

It was rare for an heir to ascend the throne without having been married, especially for someone of Will's age, whose heats had been fertile for nearing a decade. The prince had been much averse to courtship ever since his first suitor arrived just after his 13th birthday, and thankfully, his father declined to set up any betrothals for him. Will knew he would be

quite happy never marrying or mating anyone, but as King, he had a duty to continue the royal lineage.

Because he was an omega, Will was set to live longer than betas or alphas, and his fertility period would last much longer as well. While female betas reached the peak of their fertility somewhere in their mid 30s before dying in their 80s or 90s, omegas of both genders only reached the peak of their fertility when in their 50s, and could remain fertile into their 70s, before dying in their 120s. While the pressure may not be on Will to find a mate just yet, in the next 15 years or so at least, it would be expected.

Hannibal's expression hardened. “Let them try, and I'll send a blade through their voice box.”

This finally made Will smile, and he placed a delicate hand on Hannibal’s shoulder. “Down, boy. That's what the gate guards are for.”

Hannibal's eyes drifted to Will’s hand, before trailing down his arm and landing somewhere on Will’s abdomen. “I see your maids have done some of their best work for the occasion.”

Will looked down at the forest-green gown he had been trussed into earlier that morning. It was made of silk and cotton, with long flowing sleeves and accents of golden thread along the waist and collar. Instead of a crown, a thin golden band wrapped under his ears and crested down over his forehead, where a polished emerald sat just above his glabella. His dark brown hair had been washed thoroughly, and his curls were falling in delicate ringlets around his face. As much as Will hated the event, he did very much enjoy this outfit, as it used to belong to his mother, the late Queen Allaidh.

“Thank you very much, Hannibal. You don't look half bad yourself.”

Hannibal was wearing his full knight regalia, a silver and blue tunic with a green cape and tall, dark leather boots. The boots created the illusion that Hannibal was even taller than he was, which was an asset for someone whose main job description included scaring off those who wished to do Will harm.

Hannibal bowed humbly. “All on your behalf, your majesty.”

“Oh please, I've had my fill of royal pleasantries. Resume casual addresses at once.”

Hannibal looked up at Will from his bow, and his eyes sparkled with mirth. “Of course, Will.”

~

“And who are all in attendance?”

One of Will’s many court scribe’s eyes went to the top of a nearly comically long guest list as they took in a giant breath.

Will stuck out his hand, stalling the scribes inhale. “Narrow it down to those whose names I am most likely to be interested in.”

The scribe exhaled, and with a relieved look, began to skim the list.

“Hmm… Well, there's the King and Queen of Incrosangue.”

Will nodded, having received their RSVP soon after the death of his father. Incrosangue was Vilspastai’s oldest ally, and the King and Queen of the nation where Will’s godfather and godmother, King Jack, and Queen Bella. They were one of many male alpha king and female omega queen pairings to sit on the Incrosangueian throne, and contributed their kingdom's prosperity to this historically successful pairing.

The court scribes' eyes fell on another title. “The Royal Family of Blowan.”

Another non-shock to Will. The kingdom of Blowan was Vilspastai’s neighbor, and Will had spent many holidays and political visits to Blowan playing with the royal family’s middlest child and youngest daughter, Princess Alana. Born just two years before Will, Alana had become Will’s closest childhood friend aside from Hannibal. She was also an omega, and fourth in line for the throne, but she was as much beloved by her people as her parents and eldest sibling were. She was also one of the few people aware of Will’s recessive status, and had even begun to study medicine in her adulthood in order to better understand the phenomenon.

The scribe continued. “The Katz Family.”

This made Will’s eyes widen a bit. The Katz’ were the richest family in Draigoch’s central-most kingdom of Timhoir. Will had met the matriarch on a number of occasions once he began to accompany his father into meetings and engagements of more pressing import. Towards the end of his father’s life, the Katz matriarch slowly appeared less and less, being replaced by her eldest daughter, a cunning female beta by the name of Beverly. While Lady Beverly had never been anything short of genial to Will, the prince still felt like she could not be entirely trusted.

Something in the scribe’s expression twitched, almost like he was just barely able to suppress a cringe of disgust. “The Prince and Princess Verger…”

Hannibal, who had been silently watching the palace workers bustle about to prepare the ballroom for guests, suddenly snapped to attention. “They received an invitation?”

Will sighed. “No, but they sent an RSVP anyway.”

The Verger family were the reigning family of Swmhaga, a title they had just recently won, after a major war in Draigoch’s southern kingdom. Will’s grandfather had been a vocal ally of the royal family that the Verger’s ended up deposing, and the bad blood between their two countries was still managing to simmer almost a full century later. King Madadh had done some work in creating friendlier relations, which meant that Will was frequently stuck with the two remaining living Verger heirs, Prince Mason and Princess Margot, during visits to the kingdom. Princess Margot was an alpha, and far better liked than her brother, but her brother was the first born, and despite being a beta, had an ego larger than any royal Will had ever had the displeasure of meeting.

Hannibal's haunches seemed to raise at the thought of Prince Mason coming anywhere close to Will, a reaction spurred from past experiences. What started out as harmless childhood pranks pulled on Will by the slightly older prince, eventually turned into a stalker-like fascination, spurred on by nothing more than Mason's apparent hobby of harming the beautiful. Will could remember the time a teenage Mason had called him into his room to show him a "treasure" he had found, only to reveal to 10 year old Will a large, black book full of drawings of death and torture. Mason had locked his bedroom door and forced the younger prince into the corner, describing the drawings in detail, and asking how it made Will "feel".

If Margot hadn't found them before Hannibal, Will fully believed it would have ended with the Verger Prince dead, and the nations of Swmhaga and Vilspastai at war.

The scribe swallowed thickly before reading out the next title. "The Great Queen Maurier."

"Oh my…" Will couldn't stop the surprised exclamation that left his mouth. Queen du Maurier rarely left Timhoir for anything less than the most pressing and dire events, of which Will did not consider his coronation to be.

Out of all the royals on Draigoch, none were so revered, and so feared, then the omega Queen Bedelia du Maurier. Originally an omega concubine, she eventually became Queen Consort, and after the death of King du Maurier, became the final choice for the throne, having given the King no heirs, and all the rest of the King's children dying of different, somewhat mysterious causes.

Every country on Draigoch knew that attempting any act of terror or intimidation on Timhoir would be akin to annexing their entire country to Queen du Maurier, who, during her reign, had managed to make Timhoir the richest and most powerful country in Draigoch. She was friend to all, never interfering directly with the affairs of other countries, but never fully swearing alliances either. Timhoir was not safe because of friendship, it was safe because of fear.

The court scribe ran through a few other names towards the bottom of the list, all of which Will recognized, but none with which he held any strong feelings.

"Lord Chilton, The Mistress Lounds, Duke Price and Duke Zeller, Prince Tier, Lord Tobias Budge, Lady Molly…. need I read any more, sire?"

Will shook his head. "No, that will be all. Thank you."

The scribe scurried away to continue his preparations, and Will turned to face Hannibal. "Quite the turnout, it seems."

Hannibal's posture and facial expression still hadn't recovered from the news that the Verger siblings would be in attendance, and he reached down the palm the hilt of his sword seemingly without even realizing it.

"I need to inform my men to keep an eye on Prince Verger this evening. Will you be alright here, or shall I escort you to the parlor?"

Will smiled at his frazzled guard. “I know the way to the parlor just fine, Hannibal. You are excused.”

Hannibal gave Will a quick bow, before turning to walk towards the nearest guard station. Will made his way to the parlor, the only place in the lower level of the palace that wasn't heavy with the foot traffic of guests or workers. It had been set up with everything he would need to entertain himself before he was expected in the ballroom for his pre-coronation ball.

The hours passed slowly. Will drank tea and read a book as he listened to the distant bustling of palace staff outside. Right as the sun began to set in the window behind him, Will heard a familiar rhythmic knock on the door.

“Come in, Hannibal.”

Hannibal stepped inside quickly, opening the door just enough to force his body through, before closing it again. “Everyone is informed of the Verger’s presence. They should not be allowed close to you other than the handshake tomorrow, but if you’d like me to prevent that from happening, I can.”

Will dog-eared his book and set it down on the tea table next to the chaise he was currently lounging on. “No need to cause a scene by preventing them from congratulating me on my father’s death. I can deal with Prince Mason for a few seconds, as long as I’m allowed a thorough bath afterwards.”

Hannibal bowed his head slightly. “I’ll be sure to inform your maids to prepare your bath long in advance. Otherwise, I believe it is time for you to make your grand appearance.”

Will sighed and stood up, smoothing the waist of his gown out and unfolding his sleeves where he had dragged them up to his elbow. “Alright, let's get this over with.”

Hannibal gave Will a sympathetic look. “If it helps your nerves at all, I’ve made sure that you are seated with King Jack and Queen Bella, as well as Princess Alana.”

Will approached Hannibal and laced his arm through the taller man’s. “Well, at least I won’t be suffering through uninteresting smalltalk with a bunch of land owners from across the continent whose names I never cared to learn and will not remember.”

Hannibal finally smiled at the prince. “You’ll never let me live that seating arrangement down, will you?”

Will shook his head. “It’s only been a decade, Hannibal. Omegas live a very long time.”

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Will stood behind a set of large, white doors, listening to the sound of hundreds of people all involved in their own separate conversations. It was a sound Will had hated ever since he was little, because it usually heralded an evening of being fawned over, kissed up to, and poked and hugged and kissed on hands and cheeks. So many people trying to get into the young prince’s good graces, or, into his family tree.

Hannibal gave Will's shoulder a pat. "Deep breaths, Will."

Will listened, taking in a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds, and then letting it out through his nose. "Alright, I'm ready."

Hannibal gave a nod to one of the guards by the doors, who stepped through them just enough to give a nod to another guard on the other side of the door. Will listened to the sound of dual trumpets, playing the first few notes of Vilspastai's national anthem. The voices were all silenced at once.

When the trumpet's sound was over, Will heard his steward say, "Introducing his royal highness, the crown prince of Vilspastai, on this the night before his coronation, Prince Will!"

The two guards by the door each grabbed a handle and pulled it open, revealing Will to the ballroom, and the ballroom to Will. Will walked forward on the red silk rug that stretched from the doors to his table. He walked with his arms folded in front of him, the large green sleeves covering his hands. Hannibal followed after him, just a few steps behind his left side, like always. The court musicians began to play the national anthem in full, and Will kept his eyes forward as he felt the weight of so many eyes falling over him.

After what felt like an eternity, Will finally made it to his table at the end of the ballroom, where he stood in front of his seat and allowed his eyes to trail over to his right. As promised, King Jack and Queen Bella were already seated. Bella gave him a kind smile, and Jack nodded once in his direction. Will nodded back.

The musicians quieted, and Will finally raised his head to face the crowd. His table was on a small stage, just a few stairs high, but enough so that all his guests were forced to look up at him. There were so many faces that they all blurred together, like a giant mass of rich purples and reds and greens and blues, hairstyles done up and done down, glittering gems and golds and silvers. Will took a deep breath, and using the voice he had been trained to use since his childhood, addressed his guests.

"Honored guests to Vilspastai, I am touched and grateful for your presence at this, my coronation. I implore you, over the next 24 hours, to eat, drink, and be merry; indulge in all the best that my humble country has to offer you. I also thank you on behalf of the memory of my father, whose prosperous reign I hope to emulate. If I can even be half the King that he was, then my time as ruler will have been a success. Now, please, enjoy the evening that my palace has prepared for you. Long live Vilspastai, and long live the House Madadh."

Will never considered himself to be very good at speaking, or at least, no better than any other royal who received the same training in speech and poise. Despite this, ever since his first ever public address, whenever he spoke, people seemed to become hopelessly enamored. He was told that it was because of how his voice sounded. The deep gravelyness of any man, but with an omega lightness and sweetness that could hardly be put into words. Will had never noticed it himself, but he had noticed how people who had never heard him speak reacted upon hearing his voice for the first time. Even Alana, who had known him for even longer than Hannibal, confessed that it still caught her off guard at times. It was an incredible boon for a royal to have.

The ballroom was silent for a few seconds, stuck in the trance of Will's voice, before erupting into applause and shouts of "Glory to Vilspastai" and "Long live Prince Will!". Will nodded deeply to the crowd, before finally falling into his seat. A hand on his left shoulder made him look up, only to be met with the smiling faces of both Alana and Hannibal. It was Alana's hand that rested on his shoulder.

"A wonderful speech as always, Will."

Will smiled at his childhood friend, and removed her hand from his shoulder to hold it in his own. "It was hardly a speech. Just a few sentences stroking the egos of all those in attendance, you know how it goes."

The party was now back in full swing, thanks to Will's blessing. The musicians had begun to play something energetic, and the food tables and waiters were rushed as the rich and greedy from across Draigoch filled their plates. Alana nodded in understanding. "Don't I…"

It was an unspoken rule of etiquette to not approach the host at a ball unless called over or approached first. This was to prevent any crowding or mobbing of the man or woman in question, and removed much of the stress to impress. Plus, everyone in attendance knew that they would get a chance to talk to and even touch Will tomorrow, during the handshake. The only people who had the ability to speak with Will were those honored guests who sat directly beside him.

The table Will was sat at consisted of five chairs, with Will in the middle. Directly to his left sat Alana, and beside Alana sat Hannibal. To his right was King Jack, and sat next to him was Queen Bella. In a display of good will, Will forced his eyes to trace the crowd and tables for Alana's parents, the King and Queen of Blowan. They were sitting at a table on the left side of the ballroom, already looking in Will's direction. When their eyes met, Will gave a shy bow, which the King and Queen returned with much more fervor.

Before Will presented as an omega, the idea of Will and Alana becoming betrothed had been floated between their parents. Of course, there were no laws saying that a beta female and omega male couldn't be together, but such a union would not produce an heir for either family, and so the idea was dropped. Will hadn't minded, his friendship with Alana was pure. She understood him better than most people. Well, most people that weren't Hannibal, that is.

"Your father would be very proud, Will." The voice that spoke was deep and assured, and Will turned to his right to face it. King Jack was holding up a chalice full of dark red wine, and Will picked up his own, which had been placed on the table before he even sat down, and toasted the King.

"Thank you, Jack, that means a lot." Will never liked the taste of wine, but had learned to force it back on occasions like this.

"Yes," It was Queen Bella who spoke this time, her voice regal yet still light. "You were the apple of his eye. I still remember when we came to visit for your sixth month birthday, he was so excited to have you, and had such wonderful dreams in mind for you."

Jack nodded. "Dreams which have come true, in full."

Will's eyes fell back to the table and he bowed his head shyly in thanks. He was used to strangers trying to get into his good graces by sucking up to him, but he was still not used to genuine compliments from people he looked up to. Thankfully, the King and Queen decided not to push it any further, and the four royals began to engage in polite, comfortable conversation, while Hannibal silently watched the crowd.

The night continued on for many more hours. With the moon high in the sky, the guests were all sufficiently inebriated, and the musicians were playing tavern style music that had the royals and aristocrats making complete fools of themselves on the dancefloor. Will wondered what their subjects would think, seeing their Lords and Ladies hiking up their skirts and unbuttoning their sleeves to throw themselves around the room like a bunch of seasick naval men.

Finally, the song's melodies began to slow, as the waltzes began. Will began to relax, knowing that this signaled the end of the ball, and he would soon be wearing his bedclothes in his chambers, with the closest human beings to him being guards on the other side of the door.

That was, until a waiter appeared at Will's table, carrying a folded and stamped letter in a gloved hand.

"Your highness, a private message from the Prince Verger."

Will's breath caught in his throat, and Hannibal immediately stood up from his seat and reached across the table to snatch the letter from the startled waiter's hand. The waiter, sensing the tension, bowed to the table before wisely skittering away.

"Prince Mason? He's here?" Alana's eyes were wide as she stared up at Hannibal, who immediately pocketed the letter and returned his gaze out into the crowd, obviously searching for Mason's smug face amongst the drunk, slow dancing elite.

Will sighed. "I'm afraid so, not that he was invited."

Jack clicked his tongue and shook his head. "I've always been worried about that boy. I fear for the future of Swmhaga, when left in his hands."

"The Princess isn't so bad. She has a nice temperament and is quiet, it's a shame she's so stuck under her brother's thumb." Queen Bella's voice was laced with genuine sympathy for the Princess Verger.

"Yes, I'm sure most of us have wished a million times over that she was the first born." King Jack's voice held no such sympathy.

The rest of the hour went by without further interruption, but the conversation at Will's table had all but silenced. The malice radiating from Hannibal's person could almost be seen with the naked eye.

Finally, the musicians played their last song, and Will stood from his table to address the crowd once again. Despite their swaying and stumbling, upon seeing the crown prince rise

from his chair, all talking silenced as their eyes were glued on Will's figure.

"Thank you all for indulging in this night of celebration alongside me. As much as I hate to end your festivities, I believe we all have a busy day tomorrow, myself especially. Rest well tonight, and I look forward to seeing you all again soon."

The guests were ushered out of the ballroom with ease by the palace guards. Will kept his eyes focused on the middle distance until the entire room was empty, except for staff and those who sat at his table.

Hannibal, who had been helping the guards see everyone back out to their carriages, returned back to the table and extended his hand to help Will down from the few steps his table was perched upon. Will took his guard's hand with his left, while using his right to lift his gown as descended.

Alana followed, being helped down by King Jack, who then helped down his own wife. "Well," the King spoke, turning to face Will as he did so, "I don't know what Prince Mason wants from you, but whatever it is, don't let it get under your skin. That child thrives on the creation of chaos. Tomorrow is your day, and you don't need to focus on anyone else besides yourself."

Alana nodded. "Absolutely. Anything he says will be to get a rise out of you, nothing more."

Will smiled at his concerned friends. "Oh trust me, I am very aware. Prince Mason has no power within the borders of my Kingdom, no matter how much he wishes it."

With that, Will gave his final bows to his companions, who bowed back, before being escorted back to his chambers by a very tense Hannibal.

~

Upon arriving at his quarters, three of Will's maids were already present to undress him, bathe him, and put him into his nightclothes. Before Will could turn to say goodnight to his guard and retrieve the letter, Hannibal was stepping in between Will and his maids and bowing to them.

"Pardon me, but I will be taking care of his Highness this evening."

Will didn't know who was more surprised, himself, or his chambermaids. The three looked at each other, then at Will, before nodding deeply to Hannibal with an obedient, "As his Majesty wishes." As they left his room, each one bowed to Will and said, "Goodnight, Prince", for the last time.

When the doors to his chamber were closed, Will turned to Hannibal to give him a scrutinizing look. "You haven't dressed me up or down in over a decade."

It had been 13 years, to be exact. When on political trips to other countries, Will would often be unable to bring a maid with him to do his morning and night routines. While he would always be offered the assistance of the host kingdom's palace staff, Will and his father greatly

preferred having Hannibal do it instead. As a bodyguard, Hannibal had far more domestic training than most knights. He had been taught to dress the prince before he had even completed his first round of knight training, and had been able to do the task alone since Will was seven.

If Will didn't know any better, he would have thought the look on Hannibal's face seemed bashful, but when the guard spoke, his voice was just as measured and assured as it always was. "For old times sake. Plus, I would like to be here when you read Mason's note, to see if I need to send a battalion to arrest him."

Will understood Hannibal's words as being only half a joke. He huffed a laugh, and turned to present his back to Hannibal. "Well, get on with it then, I'm dying for a bath."

Hannibal didn't say anything as his hands began to work on unbuttoning the outer layer of Will's gown. The buttons were small and plentiful, and went from between Will's shoulderblades to the very base of his spine. Hannibal worked quickly and deftly, unbuttoning the gown almost as quickly as Will's three ladies would have. Hannibal then grabbed the tops of both sleeves, dragging them down Will's arms, with the rest of the garment following to fall at Will's feet. Will stepped out of the puddle of green, now wearing just his white slip. Will raised his arms, and Hannibal bent down to grab the bottom of the slip, pulling it up and over Will's head in one quick motion. The feeling of cool air on Will's bare arms and legs felt amazing, as it always did after a long day.

Will was now just in his undergarments, a white shirt with no sleeves, and soft cotton underwear. Will turned, and Hannibal kneeled. The prince placed one foot on Hannibal's knee, and his guard quickly unlaced and pulled off his slipper, repeating the task with the next foot. He then stood up, and very delicately removed the gold band from Will's forehead. When he had finished his work, Hannibal gathered up the garments and placed them into the laundry chute, the shoes in his closet, and the tiara on his jewelry stand.

"Fine work, as usual, Hannibal." Will said, flopping down onto his bed.

"Like riding a horse, you never forget." Hannibal replied as he made his way to the corner of the room, where a large, lavish tub sat surrounded by a tall pink curtain. A turn of the faucet let loose a flow of already steaming water, and Hannibal threw in a few herbs from a basket placed next to the tub. The smell of it filled the air, and Will took a deep breath in through his nose, instantly feeling the effects.

"A sleep mixture?"

Hannibal swirled the herbs into the rising water. "I figured you'd appreciate an aided rest after today's events."

"You know me well."

Hannibal did not reply, and instead continued to watch the tub fill until he was satisfied, before turning the faucet off. "Your bath is ready for you, Will."

Will lazily pulled himself out of bed and made his way over to the tub, raising his arms above his head as his eyelids grew heavy. Hannibal pulled his undershirt up and over his head, before making quick work of Will's underwear. Will had always appreciated how quickly his guard divested him of his lowermost clothing, disregarding all royal elegance in order to grant the prince a bit of dignity.

Will stepped into the tub, immediately sighing as his chilled skin was submerged within the hot water. He lowered himself down, letting the cloud of herbal steam surround him, as Hannibal pulled up the bathing stool near Will's head, and sat down.

"Are you ready to read Prince Verger's letter?"

Will's eyes were closed, and he made a wavy hand motion in the direction of Hannibal's voice. "You read it for me."

Hannibal said nothing for a few seconds, and then WIll heard the movement of Hannibal's many layers of clothing as he pulled the note out from his pocket. There was the sound of paper tearing as Hannibal opened the envelope, and then he began reading.

"Dear Prince Will. I am so happy to be present at your coronation, a historical event for your country, to be sure. I know that you will make Vilspastai proud, as your father, Gods rest his soul, did during his reign. I know in the past I have not been kind to you, or most others. I hope to begin building confidence in my rule by repairing a friendship with you, and I would like to begin by-" Hannibal's voice caught in his throat, and he paused reading. Will opened his eyes and looked up at his guard, whose eyes were filled with a completely unreadable emotion.

"By what?" Will asked, his voice laced with a yawn.

Hannibal blinked down at the note, before taking a deep breath, and continuing. "By offering you my younger sister, Margot's, hand in marriage."

Will's eyes went from half lidded to wide open, and he sat up in the water to stare at Hannibal in disbelief. "You're kidding."

Hannibal's expression was pointedly blank. "I am not. It continues- I do not expect you to accept my offer immediately, but I hope you would be willing to join me privately for tea before I am set to leave your beautiful country. I would accept a letter in response as well. Best regards, Prince Mason."

A laugh of disbelief left Will's mouth. "I don't believe it. Mason would give up Margot in a marriage…. To me? He despises me."

Hannibal refolded the letter and placed it back into his pocket. "That is what your history would suggest, yes."

"That would make him my brother in law. We'd be related. I'd be part of his family tree. Hannibal, do you think this is some kind of… strange joke?"

This time, Hannibal could not prevent the sneer that appeared on the edge of his lips. “Most of Prince Mason’s actions could be classified in that way, yes. I suggest you proceed with caution, Will. People rarely change.”

It was rare for Hannibal to be this candid with him, but Will knew that his guard only ever gave advice to the prince when he truly felt like it was the best course of action. Above all others, Will trusted Hannibal’s word the most. Oftentimes, even more than his own.

“You’re right. I’ll… sleep on it.” Despite the shock of Mason’s letter, the herbs were working their magic on Will, and he felt himself slinking back onto the tub headrest.

Will was almost dozing off when he felt Hannibal’s hand around his wrist, pulling his arm out of the water. Will opened his eyes slightly to find that Hannibal had divested himself of his cape and had rolled up his sleeves. The knight began busying himself with rubbing a soapy cloth along the length of Will’s arm, and the prince sighed at the pleasant feeling. When Hannibal finished one arm, he placed it back into the water, and repeated his actions on Will’s other arm.

When he had finished scrubbing both of Will’s arms, Hannibal placed a hand on Will’s shoulder, helping him forward into a sitting position, where he then began to scrub Will’s back. Will couldn’t help but lean into the soothing touch. With his back finished, Hannibal gave Will’s shoulder a pat, and instructed him to stand. Will just barely suppressed what would have been an entirely juvenile groan of displeasure.

Hannibal held Will’s arm as the prince rose to stand, helping to keep him upright on the slippery footing of the tub. He then began to clean the Prince’s chest, before moving down to each leg, letting Will steady himself on his shoulders and he lifted each foot from the tub to rub the rag along them. Then, he started work on Will’s thighs.

Will never liked how his maids would scrub his thighs and buttocks so quickly. The skin there was so delicate, especially for an omega, that it left the areas red for almost half an hour after his bath completed. But Hannibal never rushed. The first time he ever bathed Will, he noticed the prince wincing as he copied the maids actions, and ever since then, had always been extra delicate when bathing him.

Hannibal rubbed the cloth in circles over Will’s thighs, before gently turning the prince to perform the same motion on Will’s buttocks and lower back. He then turned Will back to face him, and even more gently, cupped Will’s genitals in the soapy cloth. Will sucked in a deep breath through his nose at the touch. Hannibal gently palmed Will’s testicles with cloth, before moving up to his penis, which he performed the same action on. He then dropped the cloth on the edge of the bath and turned the faucet back on, gathering some more water in a shallow pail to pour over Will’s body. Will shivered, his skin having cooled again while he stood once again awash in the warm water. Hannibal then grabbed a soft, blue towel from a stack near the tub, and wrapped Will in it.

“There we are, ready for bed.”

Will noticed a hint of pride in Hannibal’s voice, and he smiled. “Thank you, Hannibal. I needed this.”

Hannibal helped Will out of the tub, drying him off further with the towel once both feet were on the plush bath rug. “Of course, Will. It was my pleasure.”

When Will heard his chambermaids say the same thing, he always recognized it as something they knew they were supposed to say, but when Hannibal said it, Will genuinely believed that his guard was happy doing this for him. This seemed even more likely, seeing as how Hannibal had gone so far as to excuse Will’s maids in order to perform the prince’s nightly routine himself.

Hannibal left Will wrapped up in the soft towel while he grabbed the prince’s nightclothes from the dresser. Will’s nightclothes consisted of a pair of gray cotton underwear, and a long, pale yellow nightgown. It took barely any time for Hannibal to dress Will thanks to the simplicity of the garment, and finally, Will was allowed to fall into bed.

Hannibal had pulled the sheets back to let the prince in, and tucked Will back into the sheets once he was comfortably propped up on his pillows. He then picked up Will’s lamp and extinguished it, casting Will’s bed in darkness.

“Do you need anything else before I leave you to rest?”

Will shook his head, losing the fight of his eyelids against gravity. “That will be all, Hannibal. You are excused.”

Will watched as Hannibal bowed, and then listened as the guard blew out the other lamps in the room. The last thing the prince heard before he fell asleep was the sound of his bedchamber door’s lock sliding into place.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I just wanted to say that for this fic it is very important to pay attention to the tags. This chapter was tame, but I plan to tackle some heavier subject matter in this story. If any of the tags are triggers for you, I suggest bowing out now.

The New King

Chapter Summary

Will is crowned King of Vilspastai, and greets his guests personally.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will rose the next morning to the sound of the bell by his door ringing. One of his chambermaids would usually ring the bell to wake him up at around seven in the morning, but if the darkness outside his windows was any indication, it couldn't be later than six. He groaned and pulled the pillow over his head, only to be jolted by the sound of a fist knocking on the door. Only one person in the entire castle would dare knock on the prince's door.

"Hannibal… come in…" Will's voice was sleep weary and raspy, and he listened through the pillow as his door unlocked, and then opened.

Will removed the pillow from his head and sat up, stretching widely as Hannibal lit the lamp near his door.

"I wasn't expecting to see you until later today. Are you going to be dressing me up again?"

The lamplight flickered across Hannibal's face, his expression noticeably softer than it had been the day before. "I'm afraid not. I'll be assigning jobs to the guards for most of the morning, but I wanted to bring you this." Hannibal stepped back out into the hallway, and returned with a silver cart with several covered dishes. The delicious smell of a sweet and savory breakfast reached Will's nose, and he sighed in ecstasy.

"The cooks must have been up since last night, to have prepared this much."

Hannibal approached Will's bedside with the cart, and lit the lamp by his bed. "They had no involvement, I made your breakfast this morning."

Will couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. "It's been almost a year since I've tasted your cooking. I was beginning to worry that you gave up the hobby all together."

Hannibal pulled a bed tray out from the bottom of the cart, propping it up over Will's lap. "It didn't feel appropriate to do so during the mourning period." Hannibal removed each dish from the cart and sat them on the tray, before placing a full teacup on Will's nightstand. "But, now feels like as good an occasion as any."

Will smiled up at his guard. "Well, I'm excited to dig in. What's on the menu?"

Hannibal removed the covers from each dish, naming them as they were revealed. “Venison sausage with milk gravy, poured over a savory chive scone. A yogurt and fruit parfait consisting of strawberries, raspberries, and salmonberries, with baked walnuts along the bottom. Hoecakes with honey and jam. Fried pork belly alongside two sunny eggs. And, a pot with more tea. It’s jasmine.”

Will stared down at the feast before him, his eyes wide. “Hannibal… how long did it take you to make all of this?”

“Not nearly as much time as you’re thinking, I assure you. You have an hour and a half before your maids will be here to dress you, so please, take your time.” Hannibal always seemed to stand taller whenever he got the pleasure of feeding Will, it was similar to the way he looked after dressing or bathing Will. The prince recognized it as pride.

“Well, thank you very much. I’m starved, and won’t be able to eat again until late this afternoon, so this will do nicely.”

Hannibal bowed. “It is my pleasure, Will, as always. Do you need anything else before your maids arrive?”

Will shook his head. “No, Hannibal, nothing at all. You are excused.”

Hannibal nodded his head and made his way out of the room with the cart, closing and re-locking the door behind him, and Will’s attention fully turned towards the food in his lap. He picked up a fork and stabbed it into a piece of pork belly before taking a big, definitely not proper, bite. It was deliciously juicy, yet so crispy. The fruit parfait was sweet and sour in perfect harmony. The gravy and scone were so flavorful and warm that Will felt like he could eat them all and go right back to bed. The hoecakes were fluffy and lightly sweet, with the sharp jam and syrupy honey elevating it to pure decadence. Everything was absolutely perfect.

Will remembered the first time Hannibal ever cooked for him. It was during the first year after Hannibal moved into the palace and began his training. At that point, Will and Hannibal were still mostly separated due to the language barrier, although Hannibal was provided a private teacher, and his speech was improving every day. Will didn’t know what language Hannibal spoke before, as the only people he had met, even in other countries, all spoke the same language. Will’s father told him not to badger the older boy with too many questions, and Will, ever the obedient prince, obeyed.

It was Will’s sixth birthday. There was a huge party planned, just like every one of his birthdays as a child, before he could tell his father that he preferred a more lowkey affair. Hannibal had stood off to the side all night along with the guards, until the very end of the evening, when he sheepishly approached the young prince with a small box.

“Oh, what’s inside?” Will had asked.

Hannibal kept his eyes to the ground when he replied. “It’s a… cookie…”

Will had of course had cookies before, as was the privilege of a royal, but he wasn't going to turn one down now. He unwrapped the box, and inside was, as Hannibal had stated, a cookie. It was perfectly round and the icing was expertly done. It was baby blue, with letters piped in white in perfect penmanship spelling out, "Happy Birthday Will."

The young prince had stared down at the cookie in disbelief. He had hardly seen such a lovely looking baked good come out of the kitchen. Without thinking, he reached in and took a big bite. It was sweet, but not cloying, with a hint of lemon.

"Mmmm! This is so good!"

Hannibal's cheeks had turned as red as a berry, as he bowed deeply in Will's direction. "Thank you… your highness."

Will remembered how cute he had found the older boy back then. Despite the six years that separated them, and how quickly it seemed that Hannibal grew from a boy to a man, those first two years that Hannibal lived and worked with them meant a lot to Will, and that cookie was the turning point in their relationship. He had begun to follow Hannibal to his sword lessons, and would play with bugs and frogs in the courtyard while Hannibal did his homework. By the end of the second year, the language barrier was all but gone, and the two were inseparable.

Before Will knew it, the tray in front of him was empty, and he was dozing off again.

~

The bell near Will's door rang again forty-five minutes later, and he was jolted up from his nap, this time with the sunlight just beginning to stream in through the windows. After letting out a long suffering sigh, and taking a few seconds to mentally prepare himself for the day, he called for them to come in.

Will's coronation gown was much more intricate than the gown he wore for his ball. This gown was long, heavy, and as soft as velvet. It appeared purple in low light, but when caught in the light of the candles or the sun, it shimmered with silver. The neck, sleeves, and trim were lined with a white lace accent, which matched the white lace gloves he was to wear with it. His stockings were white, and his slippers were the same shade of purple as the dress. He had a diamond and amethyst ring on his right middle finger, but no tiara placed upon his brow. The only head ornament he would be wearing that day would be the Crown of Vilspastai, which had sat in a locked glass case since the death of his father.

His hair had been combed and spritzed with something that smelled like roses and honey, with two small braids intricately woven around several small, white flowers, before connecting behind his head. His hair was kept at almost shoulder length, not through any desire of his own, but to ensure that the traditional cultural styles of Vilspastaian omegas could be carried out.

Once he was primped and pressed to the absolute extent, his team of maids stood back to admire their work. The eldest of the group, who had been in the castle so long that she could remember changing Will's diapers, was on the verge of tears.

“Oh, your highness, your beauty is insurmountable. You are surely the fairest ruler this nation will ever know.” The other maids nodded in agreement, and one of them produced a handkerchief from her breast to hand to the older maid.

Will smiled kindly at his retinue, who he did hold a high affection for. “All because of your hard work and attentiveness. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.”

This was enough to push the eldest maid into a full sob. She was ushered out of the room by the other women, and once again, Will was alone. A unique knock on the door following the maids exit heralded that this wouldn’t be the case for much longer.

“Come in.”

Hannibal walked in, dressed partially in his knight regalia. The chainmail and tunic were in place, but no cape. When Hannibal saw Will, he froze in place, and his eyes widened. Will gave him a cheeky look.

“What do you think? Does this top last night's outfit?”

Hannibal’s gaze continued to trace up and down Will’s person, before finally falling on the soon to be king’s face. Something beneath the guard’s gaze made a chill appear along Will's arms. Finally, Hannibal spoke.

“In my inexpert opinion, yes, it does. You look magnificent Will, truly…” Hannibal swallowed and blinked, and the strange look was gone. “Breathtaking. They’ll be talking about you for centuries. The court painters will be fighting for the privilege of recreating your likeness.”

Part of the job description of being a member of palace staff might as well have included a kiss-up clause. Everyone in the castle treated Will like he could float through the air and grant miracles with the tap of his finger. There wasn’t a single day before his mourning period that didn’t include some sort of compliment from the workers. Then, there was Hannibal. Likely due to the closeness of their relationship, Hannibal never felt the need to shower Will with undo praise and compliments. That meant that when Hannibal did compliment Will, the prince knew that it was genuine.

Will bowed to his knight. “Thank you, Hannibal. Are you here to escort me to the cathedral?”

Hannibal nodded. “Indeed I am. The carriage is outside, do you need anything before we go?”

“Nothing at all. Let’s be off.”

~

Hannibal escorted Will through the palace and to his carriage. One of the guards near the front doors was holding Hannibal’s cape, and he handed it to him as they passed. In one swift and practiced motion, Hannibal threw the cape over his shoulders and then buttoned it into place. Will pretended not to be impressed.

The weather outside was sunny, with a light, late spring chill in the air. The perfect weather for a coronation, Will supposed.

They reached the carriage, and Will took Hannibal's offered hand as he was helped into the black leather seats. Hannibal followed afterwards, hitting the top of the roof before sliding in and closing the door. The carriage driver understood the signal, and with a snap of the reins, the horses were pulling them in the direction of the Royal Cathedral of Vilspastai.

Most of the people of Vilspastai followed the common religion of Draigoch. This consisted of the central worship of the Five Deities; Myrena, the goddess of water, Romend, god of the earth, Zenotar, god of fire, Heleno, goddess of air, and Veriten, the genderless deity of the spirit. There were also many minor deities, and most countries had their own specific patron god or goddess. The patron deity of Vilspastai was the Wolf Father, who was said to have sired the first citizens of Vilspastai by impregnating a female wolf.

The cathedral in question was the largest in Vilspastai, and was personally funded by the royal family. It was by the grace of the Church of the Wolf Father that Will and his ancestors stayed in power, and as tradition, Will would be crowned king by the head priest.

"How are you feeling?" Will's wandering mind was brought back to the present by the sound of Hannibal's voice across from him. The prince sighed.

"I'm sort of numb, actually. I was all nerves two days ago, and still was yesterday, but now it's… nothing."

Hannibal nodded knowingly. "That makes sense. A large build up of emotion can either lead to an explosion or a slump. You are numb, because the alternative would be to panic."

Will huffed a laugh. "Well, I guess I prefer numbness, then. It would hardly be proper for the future king of Vilspastai to be caught screaming and pulling his hair out in the back of the cathedral."

Hannibal's eyes were soft, but his expression was serious. "It's just today, Will. Then you will be free of major engagements for the rest of the year."

"Well, not fully, remember? I just got a new one." Will's mind returned to the note from Prince Mason that he had received the night before. It seemed like Hannibal did remember, given the way his face darkened.

"Now that you have slept on the proposition, do you know how you will respond?"

Will sighed and shook his head. "I'm still shocked that he would even ask. He and his family have never given any indication that they'd want to marry Margot off to me. And I mean, I definitely prefer Margot to her brother, but she is still tangled up in his web; Mason could tell her to jump off a cliff, and she'd do so without a question as to why. I honestly don't think it would be beneath Mason to engage her to me, only for her to act as a spy within my kingdom."

The darkness in Hannibal's expression receded a bit. "You're very right. His track record gives you no reason to trust that this is an act of goodwill between Swmhaga and Vilspastai."

"Exactly. And, I mean… would I really want any of my future children to be half Verger?" Will's attempt at lightening the mood caught Hannibal off guard. The knight's eyes widened, and then his expression warped into one of pure disgust.

"Will… please, don't make me think of that again."

Will laughed, and for the rest of the ride, the two sat in companionable silence.

~

The carriage arrived at the cathedral twenty minutes later. It was still very early, and the sky was still painted with light oranges and pinks from the quickly receding sunset. There were no other carriages outside of the cathedral, since Will was arriving far in advance of his guests, in order to prepare himself for the coronation.

As he stepped down from his carriage with Hannibal's help, he was greeted by one of the church's nuns, who bowed deeply before Will. As tradition, Will did the same.

"Your royal highness, what a beautiful day the Wolf Father has brought to us on the occasion of your crowning. You are truly his blessed descendant, praise be to him."

Still in his bowed position, Will replied. "Praise be."

They rose at the same time, and Will could see that this nun was very old. Her eyes were gray with age, but her skin was soft. Her lips and cheeks were pink, but her hair was white. This nun was an omega, likely just out of her fertile years. She smiled at Will, and took one of his gloved hands in hers.

"I still remember your father's coronation. The day was just as beautiful. I know he is with the Father, smiling down on you."

Will had never been much for religion or spiritual belief, but the thought of his father somehow being near him made a small warmth bloom in his chest. "Thank you, sister."

Will and Hannibal followed the nun into the cathedral, which was full of monks and nuns bustling about. Candles were being lit, artifacts were being dusted, and carpets were being rolled out. None of them stopped their work to look at Will. While the country outside of the doors of the church was Will's, the interior was their kingdom, and Will was the guest.

Will and Hannibal were taken to a back room, which consisted of a few chairs, bookcases, and a desk. The nun gestured for Will to have a seat on one of the cushy red couches, which the prince happily obliged in.

Once seated, the nun walked around to the desk and picked up a small stack of papers. "This is today's itinerary. You won't be present for most of the events, but you should know what to expect based on music queues." The nun handed both Hannibal and Will their own stack. Hannibal immediately began to study his packet, but Will kept his eyes trained on the nun as

she continued speaking. “Over the course of the next hour, you will stay back here and sip tea while your guests arrive. When they do arrive, they will be seated, and the sermon will begin. The sermon we have scheduled for today is the Wolf Father and Wolf Mother’s courtship, followed by the birth of the first king of Vilspastai. It will take roughly two hours. During that time, you will be in the chapel, being prayed over and undergoing the sacred rights necessary to become King. You will have to do this alone.” The nun glanced up at Hannibal, who immediately paused his reading to look down at Will with questioning eyes. Will nodded, and Hannibal went back to reading. The nun continued again, “After the two hours are up, you will have an hour to decompress while the guests are served lunch. Following lunch, you will make your grand speech, vow yourself to the Wolf Father and Vilspastai, and be crowned king. After which you will return to your palace. Now, if you forget any of what I've just told you, or want to explore today's events in more detail, you can direct your questions to the itinerary. Now, do you need anything before I leave you?”

Will shook his head. “No, thank you, sister."

The nun bowed her head. “You will be retrieved in an hour, your Highness. Someone should be in soon to pour you some tea.” With that, the nun made her way back into the cathedral.

Hannibal closed his packet and placed a hand on Will’s shoulder. “How are your nerves now? Still holding out?”

Will took a deep breath, holding it in for a second before letting it go. “Yes, I’m doing fine, all things considered. Mostly dreading having to spend two hours reading a bunch of scripture while drinking bitter wine.”

Hannibal nodded sympathetically. “I do not envy your position, but at least you will only have to do this once.”

Will laughed sarcastically. “Right, I become king, and then I'm no longer expected to read scripture or eat bitter food. Instead, I'll be expected to answer love letters, kiss backsides, and pump out as many royal babies as possible.”

Hannibal gave Will an appraising look, letting it linger long enough for the frustration to drop from Will’s expression, being replaced with a numb acceptance. “Do you not relish the thought of becoming a father, Will?”

Will didn't reply, and Hannibal removed his hand from Will’s shoulder in order to lean against the wall beside the couch.

“Or, something else? Pregnancy? A fear of birth?”

Will snapped his gaze in Hannibal’s direction, his expression hardened. “My mother died giving birth to me, Hannibal. You don't think that would make me a bit anxious?”

Will’s tone was more venomous than he was going for, but Hannibal didn't waver. “I understand, Will. I promise. But your mother was very ill when she gave birth, and the plague that killed her has long since been eradicated. On top of that, you are the very picture of health, and attended to by the best medical staff available.”

Will knew Hannibal's words to be true. As an omega, birth should be uniquely easy for him. In fact, only one in ten thousand omegas died each year during birth, while one in two hundred beta females died during birth. It was just that his mother was ill with the Red Death during the year of his birth, and her failing body used up the last of its strength bringing Will into the world. With the way medicine was modernizing, Will should expect nothing less than to have healthy, uncomplicated pregnancies.

It was a shame that despite all the logical thought in the world, Will was still anxious. He sighed. "I know you're right, Hannibal. I'm sure when the time comes, I will be more than prepared."

This earned Will a comforting pat to the shoulder, and then the door to the room opened, and a monk entered carrying a tray of steaming tea.

~

"With the Wolf Father as your witness, I ask that you preserve our country in life now, and in spirit after death. Do you honor this?"

Will held his forehead to a red carpeted floor as he replied, "I honor it."

The room he was in was dark, lit only by the dull orange flames of dozens of red wax candles. Monks and nuns surrounded him, all mumbling lines from scripture with their heads bowed.

The head priest cleared his throat, and spoke again. "With the Wolf Father as your witness, you declare to strengthen his lineage, so that the true children of Vilspastai may continue to walk Draigoch. Do you honor this?"

Again, Will said, "I honor it."

While most Vilspastaian's believed the Wolf Father was their one true ancestor, the family meant to be the most pure and direct link to the deity were meant to be the royal family. Thus it wasn't just societal pressure, but religious pressure as well, for Will to produce more heirs to this divine bloodline.

The priest leaned down and tapped Will's shoulder. Will rose to his knees, and was presented with a wide bowl of the reddest wine he had ever seen. He drank from it, as he had already done many times before. The taste was bitter at first, but the more Will drank, the dizzier he became, and the easier it was to open his throat and down the liquid without even registering the taste of it on his tongue.

Will thought about Hannibal, currently standing at attention on the other side of the chapel doors while the rituals took place. A foreigner in a church of a deity who was not his ancestor, but who he would be expected to bow to later today, just the same. Will had only ever asked what gods Hannibal believed in once.

"*Just you, your highness*." The knight had replied, not even looking up from where he sharpened his sword along the whetstone. Will had considered it a joke at the time, but even

if it was meant as one, that didn't make it any less true.

Hannibal had never shown interest in other people, romantically or otherwise. He did not talk about having children, or getting married, or mating. He never talked about traveling the world or taking vacations. The only place he had ever seemed to want to be was with Will, and Will could not deny how obviously proud Hannibal was for his work as Will's ultimate protector.

Will's forehead returned to the carpet as the priest spoke again. "With the Wolf Father as your witness, you declare that you will always do what you believe to be the best course of action for the survival of Vilspastai and its people. Do you honor this?"

Will replied, "I honor it."

~

Will and Hannibal were in a new room now, away from the cathedral and the chapel. It was on the second floor of the church, with plenty of windows pointed at a green hillside and a glittering waterfall. Will was sitting slumped in a large, comfortable chair, his head still swimming from the ceremonial wine he had just finished ingesting less than an hour earlier. Hannibal was beside him, pouring him a glass of water with lemon.

"Here, drink this. It will help you sober up."

Will took the offered glass and began to sip it, the cool temperature and slightly acidic taste instantly soothing him. "Thank you, Hannibal. I had no idea the wine would be so strong, or I would have spent the whole year building up my tolerance."

Hannibal produced a small white handkerchief from his inner pocket, which he gently dabbed along Will's hairline. "I'm not sure even that would have been enough time. From my understanding, there isn't much to do as a monk or a nun besides reading old books and drinking bitter wine."

Will smiled at Hannibal's lightly blasphemous comment, and took another sip from his water, watching as the waterfall crashed over rocks to plummet endlessly into the rushing river below.

~

Will stood behind a large, wooden door. The engravings surrounding it depicted several wolves and wolf pups, as well as impossibly tall trees, the sun, and the moon. The carvings had been done almost one thousand years ago, along with the construction of the main cathedral building. It was one of the oldest structures in Vilspastai.

Hannibal was no longer with Will, having been forced to stand with the other guards in the main cathedral. Will was all alone, waiting for his sign to enter. He thought about what the nun had said earlier, about his father being present, and against his better judgment, felt comforted.

The orchestra suddenly kicked up, and the national anthem played. Will knew this was his signal, and he straightened up right as the large door opened. The landing he was standing on was up a large flight of wooden stairs, which had been protected with a dark green rug. At the end of the stairs was the stage, where the head priest stood to the side, waiting. Down even more stairs, extending throughout the rest of the room to the entry doors, were long benches filled with the elite guests from last night's ball. All of them sat in silence, staring up at Will as he began to descend the steps.

He took his time with each step, holding up his skirt elegantly to avoid tripping on it. He kept his eyes trained to the stage, but could see with his peripheral, Hannibal's deep blue cape at the front of the crowd.

When Will reached the stage, he turned towards the priest, and bowed at his waist. He then repeated the action towards the guests, and then the music slowed and began to quiet.

The priest cleared his throat and opened a large, intricately decorated book. "Prince Will, you stand before the Father today, as well as all of Draigoch, to become King of Vilspastai. It is my honor as Head Priest to grant you this right. Please, hold out your left hand."

Will did as he was instructed, and a monk behind the priest handed him a long, petrified wooden staff. The priest passed this staff to Will with a bow, and Will accepted it with one of his own.

"The staff of King Harys, first ruler of Vilspastai, eldest son of the Wolf Father. May it grant you strength." The priest's voice was scratched with age, but projected out to fill the entire room with an intimidating grandiosity. "Now, your right hand."

Will held out his right hand, and a nun handed the priest a perfectly round, palm sized piece of amber containing a single red flower. The priest passed this to Will as well, who took it with no small amount of nerves. The amber was heavy in Will's hand, yet somehow felt like the most fragile thing in the world.

"The first flower, grown in the first meadow from a tear of the Wolf Mother. May it grant you peace."

Will felt anything but peaceful, but he bowed his head anyway.

Finally, two monks and two nuns approached the stage carrying a large, gold accented glass case. Within the case, on a velvet pillow, sat the Crown of Vilspastai.

The crown was made of fossilized wood, bent and carved along a silver base. The base braided together and curled up like branches on a tree, and the ends of each branch were accented with a different colored gem. The guests gasped at the sight of what was vastly considered to be one of the most beautiful artifacts in all of Draigoch.

The priest removed a key from around his neck, and used it to unlock the case. He then reached inside and removed the crown before turning back to face Will. Will lowered his knees as the priest placed the crown on top of his head. It immediately created an uncomfortable weight on Will's neck and shoulders as he attempted to balance it while still

partially crouched. Still, he kept his expression measured, and didn't wobble or sink at the pressure.

“Now, I crown you King Will, sovereign ruler of Vilspastai until the day of your passing. May you live long!”

Will rose, and turned to face the crowd with the crown perched on his head. All of the guests stood from their seats and began to clap and yell a phrase Will hadn't heard in over a year, "Long live the King!"

Will did not bow to them. He would never have to bow to anyone within his own kingdom ever again.

The back of Will’s gown was lifted by two guards as Will walked down the steps of the stage, still carrying the scepter and amber, as the priest walked alongside him. He kept his chin high as he passed each aisle, the clapping and yelling mingling together into nothing more than formless noise.

Will made it all the way down the aisle and out the front doors, where a new carriage was waiting for him. This one was white and green, with two gorgeous, white mares at the front. Two young nuns took the scepter and amber from Will’s hands, and once again, Will was standing alone.

Usually the new king or queen would be accompanied by their spouse, who would have just become the king or queen consort. But Will had no spouse to speak of, and he steadied himself to make the walk to his carriage alone. Right before he could make the first step, however, a hand entered his own, and Will looked to his left to find Hannibal standing there.

“Allow me, Your Highness.” Hannibal bowed to Will, and then stepped out of the cathedral, helping Will walk across the gravel pathway as he struggled to re-balance himself with the crown on his head.

A small crowd had gathered near the cathedral gates, and all were screaming out Will’s name, and holding up miniature versions of the Vilspastai flag. Will waved to them as Hannibal helped him up into his carriage, which, unlike the last one, had no top, allowing him to wave and greet the masses as they took the long way back to the palace. Once Will was seated, Hannibal followed suite, sitting directly across from him.

The coachman snapped the reins, and the mares set off on a gradual trot. A small parade of carriages soon joined Will’s own, each consisting of another royal or royal family, but none of which had an open top. The carriages were simply there to elevate Will’s presence, and give something else for the masses to scramble for a glimpse of.

Instead of taking the direct route back to the castle, Will’s carriage, along with all the other carriages, would take the long route through the city of Bailde, Vilspastai’s largest and oldest city. The streets had been cleared, and the sidewalks and shops and apartments would all be full of his subjects, clamoring for a glimpse of their new King.

Despite the ten minutes by horse that it took to get from the church of the Wolf Father to the downtown of Bailde, the pebbly side roads were already full of the rural residents of Vilspastai, having taken their family mules and wagons to line the church road. Will kept his head on a swivel, waving to both the left and right sides, with a bright and practiced smile on his face. Hannibal had his head on a swivel as well, but a much less friendly expression on his face, as he looked for any inkling of suspicious activity from the gathered crowd.

The road changed from gravel to brick as the carriages pulled into town. Large stone and wood buildings appeared through the trees, making up long strips of shops and restaurants, or apartments and townhomes. All the horses had been removed from the streets for the days occasion, and surrounding Will was nothing but the sound of thousands of his subjects, yelling for him to live long.

The green and white Vilspastaian flag was posted in the windows and on the corners of each building, and the country's dual wolf coat of arms sat in the middle of each one. Almost all of the gathered crowd were holding a miniature version of the flag as well. Several parents had lifted their small children onto their shoulders to get a better look, and Will made sure to wave and smile at the smallest members of his kingdom, secretly delighting in how their big eyes would widen even farther, and their mouths would erupt in ginormous, gap-toothed smiles.

For the citizens of Vilspastai, they had not laid eyes on their beloved prince, now king, for over a year.

When he was born, Will was instantly beloved by his people, and was called the “miracle of Vilspastai” given that he was born following a period of great tragedy for the kingdom. This miracle was elevated even farther when he presented as a male omega, because it meant that their prince and future ruler was a true gem to be envied by every other ruling nation on Draigoch.

The ride through town lasted roughly half an hour, and by the time they were turning back to the road that led to the palace, Will’s shoulder ached from holding up his arm to wave, and the muscles in his face had begun to quiver. The moment there were no yelling and clamoring civilians on either side of the road, Will dropped his hand onto the cushion like a sack of potatoes, and sighed deeply. Hannibal was also finally able to relax a bit, although he still kept his eyes switching back and forth on instinct alone.

“How do you feel, Will? Any different?” The knight's tone included a hint of playfulness, but Will knew that beneath that was genuine concern.

“I feel painfully the same, all things considered. All I know now is that the rest of my life will be filled with more stress and challenging decisions than I've ever had to make. I feel well prepared for it, but that doesn't make me excited.”

Hannibal nodded knowingly. “You were born with a great purpose, and were raised for it as well. Despite how you might feel, there is no one better suited for the throne than you. Certainly when compared to other crown royals on Draigoch.”

Will could tell immediately who Hannibal was talking about, if the distinct sneer in his voice was any inclination. Will smiled softly at his guard.

“Most royals also don't have someone like you by their side, either. Honestly, Hannibal, without your guidance and assistance, I don't know if I would be half as calm as I am right now. You aren't just an asset to the throne, you're an incredible friend and companion as well. So, thank you.”

The gratitude Will held for Hannibal was always felt, but rarely stated verbally. It was part of an unspoken agreement between the two men, as Will knew that Hannibal would stop the world for him, and Hannibal knew that Will would always come to him before anyone else if he needed help. The feelings they had for each other surpassed the usual relationship between a royal and their staff. While it was true that Hannibal was on Will’s payroll, Will also knew that Hannibal would stay by his side if the treasury was emptied and the palace burnt to the ground. In his adolescence, Will frequently worried that Hannibal didn't truly see him as a friend, and only put up with him due to his father saving Hannibal’s life. Now that they were both adults, Will had given the other man several opportunities to change posts, or even retire from his staff all together, but Hannibal had vehemently refused.

“*Although I am grateful to your father for everything he has given me, my gratitude towards him is completely separate from my desire to stay by your side*.” Is what Hannibal had said almost thirteen years ago, the last time Will had pressed the issue. It was soon after the young prince reached the age where he could have his own house and staff separate from his father’s, of which Hannibal was naturally the first member. Will hadn't fully believed him then, as he couldn't fully believe anyone wanting to be with him without getting paid to do so, but Hannibal had stayed true to his promise. He was beside Will whether he was needed or not, and even the basic task of bathing him or getting him into his nightclothes seemed to make him swell with pride. Will would never be able to comprehend Hannibal’s mindset, but there was no denying his words were true.

Hannibal stared at Will for a few seconds, seemingly reeling from the rare, heartfelt compliment he had just been given, before finally allowing a small smile to appear just at the edges of his maroon eyes. “Thank you, Will. That means a lot, and the feeling is more than mutual.”

Hannibal’s eyes seemed to bore through Will’s own, straight into his mind. This made the new king blush, and he quickly turned his attention to the beautiful Vilspastaian countryside for the rest of the journey.

~

The throne room of Will’s palace was full of people for what Will hoped would be the last time during his reign.

The large hall had both tables for seating, as well as tables carrying all manner of elegant food and drink. The musicians were once again playing in full swing, and as the doors opened upon Will’s return, every staff member in the palace had gathered to bow at once to their new king.

“Long live King Will!” They all yelled at once, with their waists bent and their eyes facing the ground. Will barely managed to surpress the shiver that shot up his spine.

“Thank you, all. Please, rise.” The palace staff obediently stood to attention, and Will made sure to put on the most pleasant and thankful face he could. “Your efforts this past year have been more than noticed. Following today, I will ensure that each of you receives the long-needed vacation you deserve. For those of you who served my father’s house during his reign as king, and have now moved to mine, I hope you know how much he cherished every one of you, as I do. Thank you again, sincerely.”

By the end of Will’s statement, there wasn’t a dry eye amongst the staff. As the carriages began to unload, each staff member returned to their station of work, and Hannibal was able to walk Will up to his throne.

The royal throne of Vilspastai was made entirely of twisted and curled natural wood, like the chair itself had grown from the ground along with the forest. The seat of the chair had a large, cushy green pillow on it, and Will sat down with a relieved sigh. He would not have to move from that spot until later in the evening; his only job for the rest of the day would be to sit and shake hands.

Once he was comfortable, Hannibal mechanically stood to attention at this left-hand side. To Will’s right was an empty space, one that he had never seen filled in his lifetime, as it was meant to hold the throne of the king or queen consort. His mother was the last, and as of now, there was no one to fill it.

Will didn't have much time to reminisce on royalty past, as a line of royalty present began to form in front of the steps to his throne. Will saw who was first in line, standing obediently as she waited for Will to give her the command to approach.

“Princess Alana of Blowan, you may approach the throne.”

Alana bowed at the end of the stairs, and after walking up the small flight, bowed again, kissing Will’s outstretched hand before placing it against her forehead, a uniquely Blowan way to show veneration.

“It is an honor to be the first to kiss your hand. All I wish to say is this; that you live long, and stay my friend for even longer.”

Will smiled down at the princess. “Thank you, Alana.”

Alana gave Will a cheeky smile back, before bowing a final time, and returning to the party. Next in line was one of many faces that looked vaguely familiar to Will, but that he could attach no name to. This trend continued on for a while, until finally, King Jack appeared before him.

It was an odd feeling, to see a king that Will had spent his whole life looking up to as an uncle, bending down to kiss his hand. Will almost told him he didn't have to, but the older king had bowed down before he could say anything. Jack offered no message to Will, but instead gave him a nod and a genuine smile.

Queen Bella was next, curtsying low. She did not kiss Will's hand, but instead held it between her two slightly wrinkled ones as she said, "Your father would be so proud."

It took a few more guests to recognize someone again. When he did, it was Miss Beverly Katz. She bowed and kissed his hand, before looking up at him with an all-too knowing grin. What she knew, though, Will had no idea.

"This has been a wonderful experience, your Highness. Thank you for the invitation."

Will didn't tell her that he allowed his steward to write most of the invite list, of which she was included. Instead, he cordially thanked her for coming, as he prepared for the next greeting.

A few minutes later, a short man with a smug face approached the throne, and took a knee instead of bowing while he kissed Will's hand. Will recognized him as the Lord of the House Chilton of Timhoir, a beta politician who was known for the amplification of science over all else.

"What a truly grandiose display you've put on for us; a fascinating look into the yesteryear."

Before Will could decide if he had just been insulted or complimented, Lord Chilton was gone, and someone else had his hand in theirs.

A few guests later, a young woman bounced up the stairs with such speed and inelegance that Will could hear Hannibal change position to face her more directly, which made the woman pause. She smiled at Hannibal before smiling at Will.

"My apologies for my eagerness, your highness."

Will looked up at the woman with an unamused expression on his face. He recognized her. There was no way he couldn't, there were so few people with her hair color, that if it wasn't for her personality, she would have been a sought after member of every court in the land.

"Miss Lounds, I thank you for your attendance."

The smile he received back could make a snake shed its skin. "The pleasure is all mine, truly. I just wanted to thank you for inviting me. I wasn't sure I was welcome."

Will tilted his head to the side, leaving his hand outstretched, until the young woman finally noticed and bent below his eyeline to give it a chaste kiss. Only then did he reply, "It would be unwise for me not to invite the most popular and decorated writer in all of Draigoch to a historic coronation. I'd be missing out on becoming the inspiration for your next murder mystery."

While Will's words may have been kind, there was an undercurrent of caution stitched into his tone that Miss Lounds no doubt took notice of. Will was advised by most members of his court not to invite her, as she was known to base her characters on real life people, with little left up to the imagination as to who was who. He had known, however, that not inviting her would only make her penned retribution even more swift and painful. There was no cocktail

party, no wedding, no christening, and no coronation, that wasn't partially inhabited by Miss Lounds, chomping at the bit to bring some new distorted gossip to her raving fans. If she wrote about what she did know, then she would have less reason to use her imagination, which Will knew was one of the most dangerous imaginations in all of Draigoch.

Will's throne had just been freed of the parasitic author, when a new bitter pill appeared for Will to swallow.

Standing there before him, separated by just a few steps, was Mason Verger. The slightly older prince had his dirty blonde hair swept backwards in a greasy heap, and was wearing a royal blue getup that Will thought made him look quite like a pompous blueberry.

Mason ascended the steps slower than Miss Lounds, but Will could practically see the malice radiating from Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. Upon reaching his throne, the prince dropped to his knees, and kissed Will's hand so deeply and for so long that the new king was worried Hannibal would take the chance to decapitate him right there in front of everyone. Instead, Will wrenched his hand from the other royal as lightly as he could, and with the smallest cringe he could manage.

"Prince Mason, thank you for coming, your presence was unexpected, but appreciated nonetheless."

The smile Mason gave Will made him wish that he was sitting before Miss Lounds again.

"The pleasure is all mine, your Highness. This entire day has been truly magical, and what a heartfelt sermon your church put on for us! The Wolf Father is truly a fascinating deity, but what about the Wolf Mother? Isn't she just as interesting?"

Will had to suppress the urge to roll his eyes. The handshake was for his guests to come and give him a message of goodwill, as well as get a chance to come face to face with a king, before they spent the rest of the night getting hammered on fruit wine. Not for talking theology.

"I appreciate your interest in our customs and traditions. I hope you enjoy the rest of your time here as well."

Prince Mason, woefully, did not accept Will's polite soft-goodbye.

"I'm sure I will! I'll be staying in Bailde for three more days after tonight, along with Margot. I assume you have read my letter by now?"

Will kept his expression pointedly blank as he replied, "I have, yes. As I'm sure you can imagine, I've been quite busy all day, so I haven't had time to ruminate on it much, but I will give you your answer before you leave."

This, finally, seemed to sate the prince. "Oh, wonderful. I'll be awaiting your reply then. Do you know where to find me?"

Will glanced at Hannibal out of the corner of his eye, before returning his gaze to Mason. “We’ll find you.”

Mason sent a withering glance to the king’s bodyguard, who, from Mason’s crouched position, must have looked all the more intimidating. The prince gave Will one last bow before scurrying away from the throne.

Will looked back to those still waiting to speak to him, and saw that next in line was none other than the princess in question, Margot. She had her eyes pointed down, so Will had to audibly welcome her to his throne, which she did without looking up.

She crouched low at Will’s feet, and kissed the top of his hand much more chastely than her brother. She then finally looked up into the king’s eyes, and spoke with a meek voice as she said, “May you live long.”

Will nodded kindly at the princess. “Thank you, Margot.”

Margot quickly removed herself away from the throne, and Will watched as she ran up to join her brother’s side as he busied himself with schmoozing some unlucky aristocrat near the desserts.

The next few greetings went by smoothly and without further Verger-based incident, including a pleasant interaction with the Dukes Price and Zeller, who Will had known since he was a teenager. He had always found the couple to be far too genuinely friendly for royalty, but, much like Alana, that was the gift bestowed upon those who were destined to never sit upon the throne.

Towards the end of the line, Will’s throne was approached by a skinny young man with an intense look in his eye. Although Will’s sense of smell wasn’t nearly as impressive as Hannibal’s, he knew immediately that this man was an alpha. His face also looked vaguely familiar, but Will could not place it. As the man bowed to kiss Will’s hand, the king finally noticed the saber-toothed tiger symbol embroidered onto his lapels, and realized all at once who he was.

“Prince Randall, I was unsure if you would make an appearance. Thank you for coming.”

Randall Tier was the youngest son of the royal family of Barenwulf, an island nation just a few miles off the coast of Blowan. He was also the only alpha born into the family. Will had met him a few times, but the young prince mostly stayed in Barenwulf, and away from the public eye. The last time Will had seen him was over half a decade ago, when Randall was a much smaller teenager.

Randall raised his eyes up to Will’s, saying nothing for several seconds before replying, “It has been a pleasure. May you live long.”

The prince gave Will’s hand a second kiss, surprising the king slightly, before standing and returning to the party. Will looked up and gave Hannibal a questioning glance, which the knight returned, but there could be no words spoken between the two of them before someone new was bowing at Will’s feet.

Second to last in line was a tall man, who, Will noticed, was also an alpha. The man was wearing all black, and his coat-tails were long and lined with gold. The man was also wearing white gloves, and carrying a long black cane with a golden cat's head for a handle. Will knew this imposing figure only through his father. This was Lord Tobias Budge, who was, on top of being richer than most of Draigoch's royals, an immensely talented musical inventor.

Lord Budge removed his glove before taking Will's hand in his, and instead of kissing it, shook it as if they were old friends, all while staring up at the king with an intense smile.

"I have always loved my trips to Vilspastai, and although I wish it was heralded by a happier event, this has been no exception." Before Will could respond, Tobias had pulled a small white card from his coat sleeve, and deposited it into Will's hand. "I worked with your father closely, and would love to continue supplying your court musicians with the most quality, cutting edge instruments in Draigoch."

Will glanced down at the glittery gold lettering on the card, before handing it to Hannibal, and returning his gaze to Lord Budge. "I can think of no one else whose instruments sound as sweet, or last as long. Fear not, no customers have been lost following my father's death."

Will knew that mentioning his dead dad in front of the Lord would make him feel ashamed for pitching his violins and cellos at the feet of a king, or, he thought he knew. Tobias Budge just kept smiling up at him, and then smiled at Hannibal, before bowing and sauntering back into the crowd.

Finally, almost an hour into the party, the line was empty except for one final greeter. It was a young woman, with long blonde hair, and a kind expression on her round face. Will knew her well, this was Lady Molly, the beta only daughter of an old, filthy rich Timhoir aristocrat. Will had met her several times, as she always accompanied her father in order to care for him while away from their manor staff. That was, until Molly's father passed two years prior, leaving his wealth and business to her. As far as Will knew, she had been doing quite well for herself.

Molly approached the throne, curtseying politely before planning a shy kiss on Will's knuckles. "Thank you very much for the invitation, your Highness. Vilspastai is a truly beautiful country. May you live long."

Will smiled down at Molly, who was a welcome respite from the slimy Prince Verger or money-grubbing Lord Budge. "Thank you very much, Molly."

Molly gave one final bow to the throne before finally joining the party. Upon her exit, there remained nobody else in line for a handshake, and Will had to suppress letting loose a completely improper sigh of exasperation.

"Are you alright, Will?" Hannibal's dark and rich voice washed over Will like a blanket, and the king gave his guard a tight-lipped smile.

"Well, the worst of it is over. Now I just have to sit here and look regal until dinner."

“A job you are doing quite well, if I do say so myself.” The voice that replied was not Hannibal’s, and both Will and his knight jumped at the intrusion, and turned their heads to see that someone else was standing at the bottom of the throne steps.

Dressed in a gigantic yellow gown, with her hair pinned high above her head, was Queen Bedelia du Maurier of Timhoir. Without realizing it, Will sat up straighter. “My apologies, your Majesty, I wasn’t aware that you had approached.”

Bedelia’s expression was amused, but her eyes, as always, remained deathly and stonily serious. “This is your kingdom now, and you are king. Please, call me Bedelia. May I approach?”

Will was not going to call Queen du Maurier by her first name, but he nodded anyway.

The Queen took each step slowly and carefully, appearing as though she had floated up the small flight instead of climbing. Will was going to tell her that she didn’t need to kiss his hand, but as Bedelia bowed and returned to her standing posture without so much as glancing below Will’s neckline, the king knew she had no plans of doing so anyway.

“Forgive me for not waiting in line, but well… I don’t stand in lines. I wanted to bring you well wishes anyway, and let you know that I have nothing but good feelings towards you and your nation.”

There would be no official allyship between their two kingdoms, Will knew that much, but he also knew that having Queen du Maurier say that she had good feelings for him meant that he was, at the very least, safe from her wrath. Will had heard from others that the Queen of Timhoir, although holding no official allegiances, always seemed to have a preference for omega rulers, of which Will was now included. He nodded at her, just barely remembering to abort it before it became a sitting-bow, and said, “Thank you, truly. Your presence here today was a most pleasant surprise.”

Without a change to her expression, Queen du Maurier replied, “It always is.”

With that, Queen Bedelia floated back down the steps, and her large yellow skirt was swallowed back into the colorful amalgamation that was Will’s guestlist.

“Well, that was certainly something.” Hannibal spoke, seemingly having come to the conclusion that no other terrifying world leaders would be approaching Will’s throne.

Will huffed a nervous laugh. “Yeah, you said it. I can’t believe she came.”

“Neither can I, but there’s no need to look a gift horse in the mouth. Having the Queen of Timhoir present at your coronation isn’t something most of the royals in Draigoch can boast about.”

Will knew Hannibal’s words to be true, but he still felt vaguely uncomfortable about her presence in a way he could not articulate. Will’s father had spoken to Queen du Maurier, both privately and with company, dozens of times. They were not friends, but the two countries were more than friendly with each other, without even an ancient history of war or bad blood

between the two. Despite this, Will, even as a small child, found himself wary of the older queen in a way that did not align with the respectful fear that others felt in her presence.

“Hannibal?”

The man in question quirked his head to the side at the unexpected address. “Yes, your Highness?”

Will sighed. “Could you get me some water? The coldest you can find, please.”

Hannibal smiled, and nodded down at his king. “Of course. I’ll be right back.”

The knight stepped down from the throne and disappeared amongst the crowd. Will sat alone, staring down at the sprawling partygoers on every side of him, before letting his eyes wander to his right side. He imagined what it would be like to have the second throne returned to its spot. There would be a wedding, and children, and grandchildren, following the return of that second throne. Is that what Will wanted? Did he want to have someone join him, sitting above the rabble and blended colors and loud music? After a few seconds of compilation, he decided that he didn’t know.

“Here you are, is the temperature to your liking?” Will’s head snapped back to his left as Hannibal returned, carrying a chalice. The knight handed the golden cup down to Will, who immediately took a sip, and then a gulp, and then a chug, before handing it back to his knight, completely empty.

“It was perfect, thank you.”

~

So far, the best thing about being king was the fact that Will didn’t have to stay anywhere or do anything he didn’t want to do. This meant that, after a rather uneventful feast, Will was able to excuse himself from the afterparty in order to retire to his chambers. His guests all cheered and clapped as he bowed and made his exit, and as the two large doors to his throne room closed behind him, he had to grab onto Hannibal’s arm to prevent himself from collapsing against them.

“Will, what’s wrong?” Hannibal immediately grabbed onto Will’s wrist, as the lines between his eyebrows creased even further with concern.

Will’s first response was to laugh, which just made the poor knight look even more worried. Will took a deep, steadying breath, and righted himself. “Sorry, sorry. I’m just… so happy that it’s over.”

Hannibal was not able to fully hide a relieved sigh. “I’m happy too. Come, hold my arm, the king’s chamber should be well prepared by now.”

Since Will was no longer crown prince, he would no longer be staying in the crown prince’s room. Instead, he’d be moved into a new room, dubbed the “king’s room”, but Will had always known it as the room that was once his mother’s. Apparently, his chambermaids and

footmen had spent all day preparing it for him, but honestly, Will could just as easily fall asleep right in the middle of the hallway.

The king's room was near the end of the palace, overlooking the river and an undisturbed chunk of forested mountain. It was also on the top floor, away from the hustle and bustle of the first and second. This was of an intentional design, in order not to disturb his omega mother, or his omega grandmother, when they were in their heats.

Upon reaching the doors at the top of the stair landing, Hannibal pulled the string near its side, and the two listened to the sound of glass bell ringing on the other side, followed by shuffling footsteps, and the doors swinging open to reveal all of Will's chambermaids waiting for him.

The oldest one spoke first, her cheeks rosy and brow wet from exertion. "Your Highness! What do you think? We tried to bring as much from your old room as possible."

Will stepped inside as Hannibal closed the door behind them, his eyes surveying his new and, definitely improved, bedchamber.

Unlike his old room, only one wall contained windows, the rest was all dark wood. To the left side was a gigantic four poster bed, covered in red, brown, and green quilts as well as plentiful furs. Will's old bed had been a double, but this one, aptly named, was a king.

Beside the bed on one side was a large wardrobe, and to the other side was a beautifully carved antique vanity alongside a luxurious round tub, which was already surrounded with baskets of herbs and soaps for his use.

The right side consisted of the door to his private toilet, as well as a desk and an easel which was already set up with all his paints. The back wall, which contained the door that Will and Hannibal had just stepped through, also had many bookshelves built directly into it. Present on the shelves were several books Will recognized from his own collection, as well as many he did not.

Will turned to his maids, who were staring at their king with bated breath, and smiled.

"It's absolutely wonderful, truly a room fit for a king. Great work, as always." The maids unanimously released their held breath. "Now, please, go join the rest of the staff in the after-feast festivities. Hannibal will be taking care of me tonight."

Hannibal raised his eyebrow at Will, and the maids bowed profusely as they made their way out the door. When the door closed behind them, Will turned towards his knight with a slightly bashful expression.

"Sorry about volunteering you like that, but I really just want to go to bed, and I know they'd insist on bathing me and washing my hair and-"

"Say no more. We'll get you into your nightclothes, and you can worry about a bath tomorrow morning." Hannibal exercised his rarely used right to cut Will off, and made his way towards the wardrobe, pulling out a long blue nightgown for the king.

Will smiled softly at his knight's back, and kept the smile even after Hannibal turned around. The king spun so that his back faced the knight, and he watched from his peripheral vision as Hannibal laid his nightclothes down on his bed.

Hannibal made quick work of the buttons on Will's coronation gown, but it took some more shimying than his pre-coronation gown in order to free him. Hannibal then unbuttoned the poofy white slip he had been trussed into as well, until finally, Will was left in his underwear and stockings.

Hannibal looped his fingers into the waistband of Will's underpants and dragged them down in one swift, expert movement. Will raised his arms above his head, and his undershirt followed. Then, Hannibal turned Will slightly around by the shoulders, and pulled the ring from Will's gloved finger, setting it on the bed-runner table, before gently tugging off each glove.

Hannibal then kneeled, patting his knee for Will to place his foot upon, which Will obliged. Hannibal unclasped Will's slippers, pulling them off delicately and placing them off to the side. Then, Hannibal unclipped the garters holding Will's stockings up, and slowly pulled the white fabric down the king's thigh and off of his leg. He then repeated this process with the king's other leg, and finally Will was naked again, save for his crown.

Hannibal removed the large headpiece from Will with steady hands, and immediately walked it to his wardrobe, which Will could see now contained a polished wooden bust. Hannibal placed the crown on the bust's head, and closed the wardrobe.

"It will stay here until the next time you are expected to wear it, which shouldn't be for some time, gods willing."

Will felt along his waist, reveling in the feeling of being free from so much fabric and so many buttons. "Ah, so my discomfort was obvious."

Hannibal turned towards his king with a smile. "Just to me. Now, arms up."

Will obeyed, and Hannibal draped the long nightgown over him. It was cotton, impossibly soft, as if Will was still naked. He sighed at the feeling, and Hannibal pulled back the quilts on Will's new bed. Without even being prompted, Will fell into them, and Hannibal covered him up.

"Are you all set, or do you need anything else?"

Will shook his head, his eyelids already beginning to droop at the feeling of being surrounded by the warm weight of his bed covers. "That will be all, Hannibal. Thank you for today, I don't think I would have been able to handle it so well if not for you."

Hannibal's smile, this time, reached far beyond his eyes or the corners of his lips. "It is always my pleasure, Will. Good night."

Will yawned. "Good night."

Hannibal reached up, and pulled a tassel rope hanging near the far corner of Will’s bed. The curtain surrounding Will’s bed closed, and despite the waning sunlight streaming in through the windows, or the lit lamps scattered throughout the room, Will was instantly shrouded in an inky darkness. Sleep was not far behind.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading the second chapter! I hope you all enjoy reading it as much as I'm enjoying writing it.

Here's some extra info on the characters:

Will is freshly 30, and Hannibal is 36.
Alana is 32, the Verger's are both 34.
Will's father was in his late 40s when Will was born.
Jack and Bella are both in their late 50s, and Bedelia is in her mid 40s.
So far, the youngest character is Randall, who is in his early 20s.

The Lost Princess

Chapter Summary

Will gives Mason his answer, and someone new arrives at the palace.

Chapter Notes

Please review the updated tags on this fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Will awoke the next morning, his daily routine began much as it did when he was still the prince. He was roused by the sound of a bell, and delivered breakfast in bed. It wasn't nearly as elaborate and not quite as delicious as Hannibal's feast from the morning prior, but it did its job. Following breakfast, Will was given a bath and had his teeth brushed by his maids. He was then buttoned up into a much more lowkey and comfortable gown than the previous day. It was a simple, light green affair, with gray cotton stockings and laced up brown boots to the ankle. He forewent a headpiece, deciding instead to have his hair brushed back from his face, and held in place by two small braids.

The evening prior, during his coronation feast, he had one of the waiters slip Alana a note. The message on it read simply, "Please join me for lunch tomorrow before you depart."

Lunch would not be for several more hours, and so Will busied himself with re-organizing the staff of the palace. After his father's house was dissolved following the first six months of the mourning period, his workers had rejoined other parts of the palace as general staff. Will had less staff than his father did, and it was naturally assumed that upon his ascension to the throne, those members of the prince's house would move on to be part of the king's. There were also many members of Will's father's house who, instead of retiring, stayed in the palace. Following the death of any monarch that they served, the staff of the palace were always given the choice to retire, and would be given an annual pay equal to that of their pay while still working in the palace. Despite this, almost half of King Madadh's staff stayed, even if it meant they weren't guaranteed a place in King Will's household. This was all a result of Will's father's amazing leadership and kindness, traits which Will hoped to imitate to the best of his ability.

By the time the hour before noon came around, Will had written dozens of vacation notices, and rearranged his house to include almost all of his father's previous staff. The few left out were all of the older age, and given new positions in the gardens and palace grounds, the parts of the castle where work was lightest and kindest to older bones and slower stamina.

Hannibal had been absent the entire day, which Will had been expecting. He was refreshing the guards on their duties now that a king inhabited the palace once again, and was busy setting up the training for the new guard recruits that would be starting their tenure in the castle. The kitchen staff were setting the dining room for lunch by the time Hannibal returned to Will's side.

The knight was dressed down once again, in a simple gray tunic with no chainmail beneath, and no cape. He bowed to Will, who was waiting for his guard to accompany him from the study to lunch.

"Your Highness, I hope your morning has treated you well."

Will smiled, and tapped the large stack of papers with his finger. "As well as it could have, I believe. My eyes are getting fatigued, though. I'm happy to be putting the quill to rest for a while. How has your morning gone?"

Hannibal smiled genially at Will as the king took his arm. "Very well, everything is as it should be. A well oiled machine."

The two walked to the dining room and chatted as they did so, entering to find the entrees already set and Alana sitting at the end of the table wearing a white dress with a pattern of blue flowers. She stood and bowed upon Will's entry.

"Thank you for inviting me to dine with you, it's been so many years, hasn't it?" Will took a seat at the end of the table, and his cup was immediately filled with cool water. Alana sat back in her seat, and Hannibal followed, sitting across from her. She smiled at him. "Oh, will you be joining us, Hannibal?"

Hannibal's cup was filled with tea, which he took a sip of before answering. "Yes, as long as your Highnesses permit it."

Alana's cup was filled with lemon water, and she gave Hannibal a playful smile. "Absolutely, you always produce such fascinating conversation."

Will took a long, savoring drink from his cup, which was then immediately refilled by a nearby waiter. With a wave of his hand, the waiter bowed, and removed himself from the dining room, leaving just Will, Alana, Hannibal, and two guards stationed by the kitchen and hallway doors.

"Conversation is soon to follow, but I can't keep you here without you knowing why I specifically asked for you to join me this afternoon."

Alana leaned forward and placed her chin on two clasped hands, smiling warmly at Will. "I figured as much. It would be strange for a newly crowned king to immediately take time out of his busy schedule to have a casual luncheon with a friend. So, what's up?"

Will sighed, and glanced quickly at Hannibal, who was looking at Alana. Will had mentioned his plan to meet and talk with Alana about this subject in very quick passing during the feast, but the two had been too busy to discuss it in detail, and later, too tired.

“Well… I’m sure you remember that on the night of my pre-coronation ball, I received a note from Prince Verger.”

The smile dropped from Alana’s face, and was quickly replaced with a disgusted expression. “I do, yes. What did it say?”

“Well, it seems to suggest that Mason is attempting to turn over a new leaf, diplomatically. He wants to rebuild the bridges he has burned, and so as a show of friendship, he has offered me Princess Margot’s hand in marriage.”

Alana’s ocean blue eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding.”

Will shook his head. “I am not.”

“Wow… I mean, I thought he despised you.”

Will huffed a bitter laugh. “So did I, and I’m still not convinced this isn’t a very elaborate plot to plant a spy in my kingdom. I’m sure you share my opinion that Margot’s personality and company are much preferred to her brother’s, but I still feel as though I do not know her, because of how much she has suffered beneath Mason’s influence.”

Alana sucked in her lower lip and nodded, her eyes scanning the middle distance of the table. “That’s true. I’ve always felt bad for her. She could have easily been married off or mated by now, but she hasn’t. This confirms my fears that their parents placed her wellbeing in Mason’s hands.” Alana released her lip, and it was an entire shade darker than her top one. “I’m assuming you haven’t responded yet?”

Will nodded. “Correct. He’s staying in Bailde for the next three days, and I said during the handshake that I would give him his answer before he departs for Swmhaga. To be honest, I don’t despise the idea of a courtship between myself and Margot. The only issue is that I know so little about her as a person, and I believe she doesn’t know herself very well either. There is also the concern of Mason wanting to plant her within my palace for more nefarious reasons. So, I would only accept his offer if I could ensure that Margot gets a chance to… come out of her shell.”

Alana hung intently onto every word, and when Will finished, a knowing look entered her eye. “But… inviting her to your castle in order to give her a break from Mason would end up causing an issue if Mason wanted to plant her here as a spy.”

Will nodded once. “Exactly.”

Alana took a deep breath in through her nose, once again staring at the slowly cooling dishes on the table before them. “I believe I know the question you are going to ask me, but, ask me anyway.”

Will sent Hannibal another look. This time, the knight was looking expectantly in his direction. Will returned his eyes to Alana, who was now meeting his gaze. “You have every right to refuse this request, and I want you to know that if you do refuse, our friendship will not suffer in the slightest. That being said, I was wondering if I could offer your household as

a place for Margot to stay. Under your care, she would be free to become her own person, away from her brother, and you could keep an eye on her to see if she truly is being used as a plant."

Alana kept her eyes trained on Will's for a few seconds after he had finished speaking, and after a few seconds, she smiled, and reached out to place her hand over Will's on the table. "I would be more than happy to help rip the rug out from under that pig Prince's feet. Of course, if your offer is accepted, I would gladly accept Margot as a temporary lady in waiting."

At Alana's acceptance, Will immediately released a breath he didn't know that he had been holding, and smiled back at her. "Alana, I cannot possibly thank you enough. I'll let you know whether or not Mason agrees to it as soon as possible after I meet with him."

"Of course, of course. I await with bated breath. Now…" Alana looked across the table to Hannibal, who was observing the two of them silently, and then down at the first course in front of them. "Let's eat, so that I don't have to return home on an empty stomach."

~

The rest of lunch with Alana contained plenty of delightful conversation, and ended with a double cheek kiss and the Princess' departure. Hannibal had not participated much in the table conversation, as he was wont to do. The knight was always cordial and friendly with Will's friends and allies, but he had made it clear that his interests and concerns started and ended with Will, and nobody else.

Once Alana was seen off to her carriage, Will had a steward pen a letter to take into town for Prince Mason. It requested both Mason and Margot's presence in his study before dinner that evening, and Will made sure to specify the before, so the steward did not accidentally invite the Verger's to dine with him. Once the steward was excused to send the note on its way, Will and Hannibal were finally alone in the parlor, and Hannibal could once again speak freely to his king.

"So, you have decided to accept Prince Mason's offer. Albeit with conditions."

Will sat himself down on the plush parlor couch, and began to pour himself a cup of tea. "Yes, I have. Princess Margot has an undeniable pedigree, and seems to lack the… unpleasant attitude of her brother. If she is able to obtain a personality of her own under Alana's care, and we both end up enjoying each other's company, then I see no reason why she would not be a fine Queen."

Hannibal remained standing, just a few feet away from Will. It would normally be seen as rude to remain standing while a king sat, but Hannibal was not a common duke or aristocrat, and so Will never held him to the normal etiquette standards when the two of them were alone.

The knight's hand went to the hilt of his sword, where it squeezed thoughtfully. One of the knight's very few nervous ticks. Will stopped his pour, and set the teapot back down onto its stand. "I imagine you have some thoughts about my decision. Please, don't start becoming scared to share your opinions just because I sit on a higher throne."

Hannibal's fidgeting hand paused, and then dropped back down to his side. "My apologies, Will. Your plan is well thought out, and intelligent. It's just that I have a… very strong dislike of Prince Verger, and by no fault of Princess Margot's own, mentally, I tie her totally to her brother. It is true that a union with her would provide both of your kingdom's with great prestige, and furthermore would help ease your anxieties around suitors coming to your door. I just feel like… perhaps… there are more options out there for your future marriage that don't include such heavy familial baggage."

Will huffed a laugh, and Hannibal finally returned his gaze. "I don't cherish the idea of having Mason as a brother-in-law, believe me. That being said, I won't approve of a betrothal until Alana confirms that Margot is no longer a puppet to her brother, and even then, I will not marry her if I do not feel like our union would be happy. Then, even if we aren't a mating pair, I hope that this will give her a chance to establish herself as her own person."

Hannibal still had a slightly anxious look about him, but he finally sat across from Will, and finished pouring the king's tea. "Your kindness and forethought are truly one of a kind amongst all of Draigoch's monarchs. I wish the best for Princess Margot, as well."

Will smiled at Hannibal as the knight then poured his own cup, only lifting it up to his mouth once the other man had finished pouring. "Thank you for your trust in me, Hannibal."

Hannibal took a drink from his cup, which was small and white and detailed with pink and blue flowers. It was part of his grandmother's collection, and Will always thought Hannibal, so imposing and grand, looked incredibly silly whenever he drank from it. He swallowed, and placed it back down on its saucer. "You have never given me a reason not to trust you. And I doubt you ever will."

~

Roughly two hours later, a footman found Will and Hannibal in Will's study, where the king was continuing his paperwork. The footman was holding a small white note on a silver plate, and Hannibal took it, excusing the footman in the process. Will eagerly placed the quill back to rest in the pot, and turned to face his knight.

"Well? What does the Prince say?"

Hannibal wasted no time in reading it aloud. "Dear King Will of Vilspastai, it would be my and my sister's honor to meet with you. Please expect us at your palace gates a quarter from six. Yours, Prince Mason Verger of Swmhaga."

Will rolled his eyes. "He knows I know who he is and where he's from, of course. What a waste of ink."

This made a small smile appear at the corners of Hannibal's lips. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

~

Will was waiting for the Prince and Princess and when they arrived, sitting at the end of a long, oak table, with Hannibal at his back-left side. Two chairs sat at the other end of the table, empty and waiting to be occupied by the siblings.

The two doors to the room opened, and a steward opened his mouth in preparation to say the titles of those who would enter, before being quickly cut off by Prince Mason's eager approach to Will's side.

"Ah, your Highness, I was not expecting an answer so early! I-" Hannibal immediately stepped to Will's right side, grabbing the hilt of his sword and interrupting Mason's sightline. The prince paused, and then smiled devilishly at the knight. "I see you have company, of course. Forgive me my eagerness."

Will tapped Hannibal's side, and the knight retreated back to Will's left side, while keeping an intense, hair raising stare on the prince. "Eagerness is a much preferred emotion to many others. There is no need to kiss my hand. Please, you and Margot have a seat." Will motioned to the other end of the table, and the two siblings obediently took their seats.

Mason immediately leaned forward with his hands grasped in front of him, and a large smile on his face. "So, I assume this meeting is to discuss my proposition?"

Will nodded, and cast his gaze to Margot, who had her eyes directed down at the carved wood of the table. She was dressed in traditional Swmhaga couture, with her light brown hair tied into two braids resting on each shoulder, and a golden band wrapped around her head. "I have. I have decided to accept a possible betrothal, but only if the conditions I am about to state are met."

This made Margot raise her head, and Mason's smile somehow managed to grow even wider, and more grotesque. "Of course! What excellent news! Please, do tell, what conditions do you require?"

Will sent Mason a withering gaze. "I will only become betrothed to Margot, if she is allowed to leave Swmhaga, by herself, to a friendly kingdom that is neither yours, nor mine." The corners of Mason's mouth twitched, and his smile faltered. Margot's eyes finally raised to Will's face. "I think it's obvious to most that you and Margot share a very close relationship. Due to this, I believe much of her identity is wrapped up in her closeness with you. I wouldn't feel right taking her from being attached to you, only to then attach her to me, with no chance for her to become a fully realized person. Princess Alana of Blowan has agreed to take Margot as a lady in waiting within her household, where she will be free to explore herself separate from the influence of crown princes, or kings. If, after this time with Alana, she still wishes to begin a courtship with me, then I will agree to become betrothed to her. These are my conditions."

The atmosphere in the room had tanked, along with Prince Mason's expression, which was replaced with an intensely sour look. Princess Margot looked confused and stunned, and she gave her brother a nervous look. Mason's eyes did not fall from Will's, as if he was trying to strangle the king using force of mind alone. After several agonizing seconds, the prince's face pulled back up into that same unreal smile, and he reached out to give his sister a too-hard pat on the shoulder that made her wince.

“Well, I don’t relish being separated from my beloved sister, but I suppose marriage would have resulted in that anyway, would it not? If that is what it takes for you to accept her as a candidate for marriage, then so be it. I can have Margot sent to Blowan in a week's time, if Princess Alana will be ready for her.”

Will was a bit shocked that Mason had agreed, and for a second, he considered it more likely for the prince to throw himself across the table and wrap his hands around the king’s neck. Margot seemed just as shocked, but not upset. She gave Will an indecipherable look, but if Will had to make a guess, he would say that it was something similar to gratitude.

“Excellent. I will send a letter to Alana at once. She is still on the road to Blowan, so it should reach her by this time tomorrow.” Will then turned his attention to Margot, and spoke to her directly. “I eagerly await the stories of your time in Blowan, Princess. I know you will be in the best care possible.”

Margot blinked nervously, and then bowed her head in Will’s direction. “Thank you, your Majesty.”

Soon after, both Verger’s left the palace. Mason’s facade didn’t drop again as he vigorously shook Will’s hands, and spoke of what good fortune their future union would bring upon Vilspastai and Swmhaga. Immediately upon their departure, Will penned a letter to Alana, and had it sent in the direction of her carriage.

With his meeting finished, it was time for dinner. Hannibal accompanied him to the dining room again, and the two ate in companionable silence.

~

The rest of the day continued calmly and overall, very boringly. The hour before midnight finally arrived, and Will was whisked off to bed. Hannibal wished the king a good night, but did not stay to undress or bathe him as he had the two nights prior. Will secretly missed his knight’s careful attention, but Hannibal’s job was to guard him, not dress him.

Will was comfortably in bed and half-asleep when he heard the sound of distant yelling, and footsteps within his castle. He sat straight up in bed, but kept the bed curtains drawn, until he heard Hannibal’s telltale knock, followed by the sound of a key turning in the door, and it opening and closing.

“Will? Are you awake?”

Will pulled the curtains back and stepped out of bed, dressed fully in his nightclothes. “I don’t know how I couldn’t be. What’s happening out there?”

Hannibal shook his head, and he had a concerned look on his face. “Apparently someone is at the gate, demanding to be let in. I am going to go down there, but wanted to check on you first, and inform you of the situation. I’ll be relocking the door behind me when I leave, please, stay put until I return.”

Will nodded. “Of course. Be safe, Hannibal.”

“Always.” Hannibal said as he reclosed the door, and locked it.

Will stood up from his bed and went to go sit at the desk, where he spent several tense minutes staring at his bedroom door. The sound of commotion had left along with Hannibal, as most of the guards in the palace had likely rushed to the gate.

Ever since Will was a child, it had become an almost semi-annual affair to find people attempting to climb the gates, or gain entry to the palace, in order to see the fabled omega prince. His father, who was known for his mercy and kindness, always made sure these offenders left the palace grounds without the ability to ever climb a gate again.

Just when Will was beginning to grow genuinely nervous, Hannibal’s knock rang out on the wood of his bedroom door, and was quickly followed by the lock turning, and the doors opening. Will stood to meet his knight, who had a very grim appearance.

“Hannibal? What is it?”

Hannibal stared at the ground in front of Will’s feet for a second, before finally drawing his eyes up to the king's. The look on his face was haunting. “There is a young girl at the gates. She says her father is a Prince of Vilspastai, and she is asking for sanctuary, because she is pregnant, and he is currently hunting her.”

Will’s bloodstream seemed to fill with ice, and his eyes dropped to the carpeted floor of his bedchamber. The room was filled with silence for several seconds, before Will took a deep breath, and brought his eyes back up to Hannibal’s.

“Take me to her.”

~

Will was only eight years old when he came across a dusty old portrait shoved into a corner of the palace basement. It was covered in blankets and cobwebs and terribly weathered, but Will lifted it up, and with Hannibal’s help, managed to drag it up and out into the courtyard, where the sun finally revealed its image.

The painting contained three people. One of those people was very obviously Will’s father, standing proudly in front of his throne. There was a woman next to him, though, that Will had never seen before. He thought at first that it might be his mother, but he had seen many portraits and sketches of her, and the woman in the painting he found looked nothing like her. She looked older, her hair was blonde, and her eyes were brown. Will shared his dark brown curls and green eyes with his mother, a fact which his father reminded him of often. The final person in the painting appeared to be younger than both his father and the mysterious woman, but older than Will was now. He looked closer to Hannibal’s age, like he was in his young teens.

Hannibal at once realized that they might have found something they weren’t supposed to find, and urged Will to return it to where they found it, but Will insisted on asking his father who the other two people in the painting were. Will propped the painting up in a gazebo, and he and Hannibal went into the palace to find his father.

Will entered the study had jumped into his father's open arms, as he usually did, and when is father asked why his beloved son was covered in dirt with hands the color of charcoal, Will told his father what he had found in the basement, and the king's face suddenly paled, and a solemn expression grew over his face.

"Oh, Will. I knew I would have to tell you, but I didn't want it to be now." Is what his father had said, as tears welled in his eyes. Will had rarely seen his father cry, so this startled the young prince, and he held onto his father's shirt tightly.

His father then told him that when he was very young, he got married to a beta woman, who he had been engaged to since childhood. She was of noble blood, with a large dowry, and Vilspastai was not as rich then as it was now. They had a friendly marriage, but they did not truly love each other, as he had loved Will's mother. In the end, they managed to have one child, a male alpha son whom he named Jacob. He and his wife loved Jacob very much, and they raised Jacob the best they could, and they all seemed very happy, until one day when Jacob was sixteen, he came into his bedchamber to find his wife dead on the floor, and Jacob leaning over her, holding the sword that had been plunged into his mother's chest.

It was then that Madadh discovered that his son was a monster, and had been killing animals on palace grounds, and raping the female staff of the palace. His mother had found out, and threatened to have him imprisoned and stripped of his titles, and so he killed her in a fit of rage. Prince Jacob constantly flipped between begging his father for forgiveness, and cursing his father to eternal damnation. Eventually, Jacob was indeed stripped of his titles, but as Madadh could not bear to give the order to kill his only son, Jacob was sent into exile.

Exile for a criminal in Vilspastai meant being blindfolded, and taken as deep into the untamed wilds as a horse could go. Then, the prisoner would be released, and left to fend for themselves, as long as they never returned to civilization. For almost all that met this fate, it was a death sentence, not at the hands of man, but of the elements and wildlife. King Madadh had told Will that Prince Jacob was surely dead.

Will had hung onto every word, and at the end, had wiped his father's tears with his own dirty hands. Hannibal had been present as well, at King Madadh's insistence. All of the palace staff knew, as did the citizens of Vilspastai. Will understood then, why his father cherished him so highly, and why the citizens always wept along with their cheering whenever they saw him.

Hannibal took the portrait back to its secluded corner of the basement, and Will never spoke of it again, although occasionally he would think of his brother, the prince who was lost in the woods.

~

Will approached the gate, having donned boots and a long cloak over his nightclothes, with Hannibal close on his heels. He saw that the guards were circled around a young girl, who was crouched in the dirt. Will raised his hand to the gate guard, who opened it, and the guards surrounding the girl parted and bowed at his approach.

The girl looked up as Will's shadow cut through the moonlight in front of her. She was wearing tattered clothing, like that of a famine stricken peasant. Her brown hair was matted, and her fingers were ripped and scarred. Tears were still flowing from her blue eyes as she met Will's gaze.

"What is your name?" The king asked, his voice authoritative yet still soft.

The girl was breathing heavily, like she was in pain. "My name is Abigail, I am the daughter of Prince Jacob, and I seek sanctuary." Before Will could speak again, she reached into her dress, and produced a rusted brooch. Will kneeled down before her, and took the brooch from her ruined fingers. He recognized it immediately, as a brooch given only to children of the Vilspastai royal family, with two wolves placed back to back in front of a large pine tree. He had one of his own, bestowed upon him on his 13th birthday. He felt the rusty exterior with his fingers, before looking back at the girl in front of him.

"You said that Prince Jacob is hunting you. Why?"

Abigail sucked in a haggard breath, like she was suppressing a sob. "He doesn't want me to leave him. He wants me to stay forever. But I can't… I don't want this… I can't…" The girl sat up more, and pulled back her tattered outer layer to reveal a noticeable, but still small, bump on her abdomen. Realization washed over Will like acid.

The king stood up, and addressed his guards. "Bring her inside. Instruct the maids to clean her up, and have her sent to my old room."

The guards immediately bent down to help up the girl, eventually having to carry her inside, as her legs buckled the second she made it upright. Once she was out of earshot, Will turned his attention to Hannibal, who looked about as bloodthirsty as Will felt.

"Tell your guards to place the palace in lockdown. Nobody in or out unless you or I okay it. And have a scribe prepare a note to send to the newspapers, that Prince Jacob is alive, and dangerous. Tell them that if any citizen sees him, and has it within their power, that they may execute him."

Hannibal bowed to Will in acknowledgement, and Will returned to the palace to redress, and meet with his niece.

~

Will's chambermaids redressed him quickly and without speaking, as word always travels quickly within castle walls. Once redressed, he checked with his stewards to ensure that the notice about Prince Jacob had been sent into town, after which he was quickly found by one of the older palace maids, who informed him that Abigail had been washed and redressed, and was waiting for him in his old room. On his way there, he was rejoined by Hannibal. The two said nothing as they approached the room, and Will knocked gently.

"Abigail, may I enter?"

A very small, scratched voice replied from the other side, "Yes."

Will entered, and Hannibal followed, closing the door behind them. Hannibal didn't relock the door, but instead stood in front of it while Will approached the girl, who was sitting in a ball near the top of his old bed. Will sat at the foot.

"Abigail, you were very brave to have found this place by yourself. I can't imagine how scared you are, but I want you to know, you are safe."

Abigail was no longer crying, but her eyes were puffy, and her face was flushed. She stared at Will for a few seconds before asking, "Who are you?"

"My name is Will. I'm the King of Vilspastai, and your father is my half-brother, although he was exiled long before I was born. I was aware of his existence, but he was thought dead many years ago."

Abigail blinked at Will, before turning her gaze to Hannibal, who was still standing at attention in front of the doors. "And him?"

"That's Hannibal. He is my personal knight."

"But… he's an alpha."

Will's eyes widened, and he turned to look at Hannibal, who also looked stunned.

Ever since Hannibal arrived at Vilspastai, he had been dosed with rut and pheromone suppressant elixirs. This stopped his desire to mate, and meant that other alphas and omegas could not smell him. While he definitely had a build and strength that was common for alphas, there were also plenty of betas who were strong and tall.

Will turned back to Abigail. "How did you-"

"It's his eyes." Abigail kept her gaze locked onto Hannibal, like she was scared that the second she looked away, the knight would leap forward and swallow her whole. "They're the eyes of a predator. Please… make him go away."

Will had no idea what the young girl was talking about, but he imagined that she was likely deeply traumatized, and had simply guessed correctly in her fear of being in the presence of Hannibal's undeniably intimidating figure. Will turned back to Hannibal and said, "Please, wait on the other side of the doors for now."

Hannibal said nothing, but simply bowed, and left the room, closing both doors behind him. With just Will and Abigail left alone, the girl visibly untensed.

"Abigail… just because Hannibal is an alpha does not mean he wants to harm you. I give you my word, I have known him almost my entire life, and he has only ever protected me."

Abigail still looked unsure, but a bit of sanity seemed to re-enter her expression, and she shook her head as if she had a horrible headache. "I'm… I'm sorry I just… don't want to be around any alphas right now."

Will nodded. “I understand, and so does Hannibal, I assure you. Now, I must ask, are you an omega, or a beta?”

“Omega. I just had my first fertile heat, and…” The young girl looked down at the light roundness of her belly, but did not finish her sentence. Will was not going to ask her to continue.

“So, that makes you about… nineteen? Twenty?”

“Nineteen.” The girl sniffed, but her voice was becoming steadier, and less frantic.

“I see. Where were you being kept, these nineteen years?”

Abigail clasped her hands together tightly, and it took her several seconds to reply. “A cabin, in the woods. I don’t remember my mom, I think my dad… hurt her, the same way he hurt me, and I was born because of that.” Will felt sick, but he made sure not to show it. “He raised me, and told me that I was a princess, and that one day he would come back here and reclaim the throne and I’d be by his side. But the older I got, the less he allowed me to go outside, and the angrier he got. He said I needed to continue the royal lineage… I… I didn’t want to. I don’t want to. I don’t!”

By the end of her statement, Abigail had worked herself back to tears, and Will had stood up from his spot at the end of the bed to move to the head. Almost immediately, the young girl leaned into his chest, and it was in that position that she cried for several minutes.

Will felt like his heart might explode out of his chest. The pain this girl - no - his niece was going through felt almost unfathomable, and yet he could feel his hands threatening to shake, and his eyes threatening to spill over with tears. But, he held fast, and cradled her as she cried, and ran his fingers through her freshly brushed hair.

When Abigail’s sobs finished, and her breathing slowed again, it was Will who spoke to ask, “Do you not want to bring a child into this world?”

Abigail nodded into Will’s chest.

“So be it, then. I will contact my court doctors, and they will help rid you of this burden.”

Abigail raised her head, to stare at Will with glittering eyes, full of disbelief.

“Really? That’s possible?”

Will smiled sadly down at her. “It is, yes.”

“Then… is there a way for this to… never happen again?”

Will nodded again. “If that is your wish, then a surgery can be performed to remove your child-carrying organs. I should warn you, though, that it may affect your lifespan. You’d live likely no longer than a beta, and-”

Abigail shook her head, and grabbed the front of Will's shirt with desperate hands. "I don't care! I don't want this, now, or ever, with anyone. I want to be rid of this forever, please, let them rid me of it."

Will reached up and removed her hands from where they dug into his shirt, and held them in his own. "Then it shall be done, Abigail."

A shuttering, painful-sounding breath left Abigail's mouth. "Thank you… thank you…"

Will turned his body, and helped lay the girl down onto the plush covers of the mattress. "I will send for the doctors right now, but you need to rest. It is likely that they will wish to perform the first procedure as soon as possible, but they'll need time to prepare for it. You shouldn't expect to be called on until tomorrow morning."

Abigail nodded, and Will pulled the large, soft blanket up to her chin. He stood up from the bed, and blew out the bedside lamp, not without first caressing the young girl's hair a final time.

Will left the room to find Hannibal still standing to attention just outside. He turned to look at Will with a concerned expression. "Well? How is she?"

Will sighed. "She is doing as fine as can be expected. It seems that Jacob kept her prisoner for many years, and was going to attempt to use her to create a 'new lineage for Vilspastai'." Hannibal visibly grimaced, and his hands tightened into fists. "I am going to wake up the court doctors so they can prepare to perform an abortion, and possibly a full removal of her child-carrying organs, tomorrow morning. This is, at her request."

Hannibal nodded solemnly. "I believe that is the very least she deserves to be granted. Poor child…"

Will had hardly seen his knight so distraught, and he reached out to place a comforting hand on his upper arm.

"She will be safe here, until the end of her natural life if she so chooses. In the meantime, Jacob must be found, and as swiftly as possible executed. He has performed heinous crimes, and gone against the terms of his exile."

The reminder of Jacob seemed to light a fire within Hannibal, as the sadness on his face was immediately replaced with white-hot anger. "I will send out a battalion to search the forests and farmland on the outskirts of Bailde. If you will excuse me."

WIll nodded. "You are excused."

Hannibal bowed, and then set off down the hallway to the guard barracks. Will went in the opposite direction, in order to find someone to be sent to wake up the court doctors from their practices in Bailde, specifying that he wished only for beta and omega doctors and nurses to be brought back to the castle.

The rest of the night included no sleep for the king, or his closest knight. While Hannibal was organizing the first search party, Will was briefing the physicians on the nature of Abigail's trauma, and how to best proceed with her. There was also the issue of succession, as Abigail's existence meant that she could possibly have more claim to the throne than any of Will's future children, a thought which didn't trouble Will very much, but made some members of his court worry.

"But, what of her mother? If she was not born through a royal and legal union, would that not make her a bastard?" Was what a particularly unwise secretary decided to declare, as the night turned into the wee hours of morning.

Will was seated upon his throne, and his head had snapped in the direction of the secretary so quickly that they flinched as if shot. "And what of mine? In my great grandparents' time, a child born of the second spouse of a king or queen was considered a bastard as well. She is the granddaughter of my father, which makes her a Princess of Vilspastai, so you will bite your tongue the next time you decide to speak of her."

The secretary had bowed deeply in apology, their head nearly touching the ground, before skittering back into the shadows.

Before tensions could recede, one of the lower stewards approached Will's throne, and bowed. With a nod from the king, she then spoke. "Of course, she is a Princess, and will be honored as such. However, as the law states now, since she is the only child of the eldest Prince, that makes her next in line to the throne, even before your own future children. Surely, this raises some concerns?"

A dropped pin would have sounded like a clap of thunder, at that moment. Will stared down at the steward before sighing, and replying, "I will leave it up to Abigail, if she wishes to keep her spot in the line of succession. I have no desire to change the law now, and if she so chooses to keep her status as Crown Princess, then I will personally oversee her education. This, however, will wait until she is well, however long that takes."

The steward bowed in acknowledgement, and left the foot of Will's throne. The king prepared himself for more inane questions, only for a footman to arrive before him, and inform him that the head doctor wished to speak with him.

The head doctor was an older beta woman by the name of Primm, whom Will had been cared for by since he was a child. She was just leaving Abigail's room, and pulling two leather gloves from her hands, when Will approached.

"Ah, your Highness, it is always a pleasure to see you, although I do wish it was regarding a happier occasion."

"Likewise. Have you examined her?"

Doctor Primm had a permanent smile on her face, and spoke with a perfect calmness, no matter how disturbing the subject matter. "Yes. She is a very resilient girl, and I believe she will have no issues going through with an abortion procedure. I estimate her to be about 12 weeks along, a time where most beta females and omegas are not yet showing. The only

reason she is, is because she is rather malnourished and underweight for her age. I suggest waiting a few weeks before performing a hysterectomy, so she has a chance to regain her strength."

Will nodded. "Thank you, Doctor. When will the procedure be performed?"

"I'll have the theater prepared and staffed within two hours. I've sent an order to your alchemist for an anesthetic elixir as well. She'll be asleep for it, and won't feel or remember anything."

Will thanked Doctor Primm again, and she bowed, before making her way off towards the medical wing. Will entered his old room, which now seemed to be Abigail's, and found her lying in bed with heavy-lidded eyes. She turned her head to face him, and smiled slightly.

"Hello."

Will smiled back. "Hello there, Abigail. You have a few more hours before Doctor Primm will be ready for you, so you can continue to rest."

Abigail nodded, and returned her eyes to the painted ceiling of Will's old room. "Thank you. I'm sorry for how I acted when I arrived. I hadn't slept in two days, I guess I was beginning to go a little crazy."

Will approached the bed, and sat near Abigail's waist. "There's no need for you to apologize, anybody in your position would have been the same, or worse."

Abigail blinked up at the ceiling for a few seconds, seemingly deep in thought, before reaching out her hand to touch Will's knee. "Can you tell that knight… Hannibal… that I'm sorry for calling him a predator. I know it wouldn't make sense for every alpha to be like dad… I just… wasn't thinking straight."

Will smiled softly down at his niece, and placed his hand over hers. "I'll tell him, but I promise he understands."

Abigail dropped her hand from Will's knee, and her eyes slowly closed. Sleep had once again overtaken her, and so Will gently removed himself from the bed, and left the room to let her rest until Doctor Primm was ready for her. The second her door was closed and relocked, Will was startled by the presence of someone who had been waiting just out of eyesight.

"Oh! Hannibal, you startled me."

Hannibal looked lightly disheveled, no doubt a result of being out in the barracks for the last 3 hours. His eyes were soft and his body posture was not nearly as confident when he asked, "What did the doctor say?"

Will smiled at his knight. "They said she is indeed strong enough to undergo the procedure, and she'll be sent to the theater in two hours. She has rested some, and has calmed down. She wishes to apologize for what she said about you before, as well."

Hannibal looked at the closed door. “I understood where she was coming from. It’s not as if Jacob set a good example for us.”

Will had rarely seen Hannibal show such genuine emotion for someone that was not himself. It was touching to see how concerned the knight was for Abigail.

“We’ll be the ones making an example of him, the second he is found. My poor father might not have had the strength to send his own son to the block, but I, personally, have no qualms in doing so.”

~

The night sky was just beginning to bloom with the first lights of morning when Doctor Primm informed Will that she was ready for Abigail. Will helped the princess drink the anesthetic elixir, and within minutes, she was fast asleep, and getting wheeled down to the medical wing. Doctor Primm invited Will to view the procedure, but the king politely declined.

The paper would be hitting the doorsteps and dirt walkways of every cobbled house and farm in the capital region within an hour, and the king would be expected to prepare a speech. Will was looking forward to not having to make a speech for several months, until the Vilspastai day of founding at least, but fate had other plans.

Will was halfway through with a pot of ink when his bedchamber door was knocked on in that special rhythm, and Hannibal entered. He had re-combed his hair, and now donned chainmail beneath a sturdier, leather tunic.

“Abigail is back in her room, but has not yet woken up. Doctor Primm said that she did fine, and that the procedure was a success. She also said that… the fetus within Abigail had no heartbeat, and was at risk of being expelled rather painfully within the coming week, if she had not made her way here at the time she did.”

Will sighed, and a tension he did not know he was holding was suddenly released, leaving him feeling all the more exhausted. “I see. Thank you for telling me. From now, all she has to worry about is regaining her strength.”

Hannibal nodded, but he had a strange look on his face. Before Will could ask what was wrong, Hannibal spoke. “I have made Abigail breakfast. It’s rather small, and probably a bit boring, but I ensured that everything in it would help her heal without upsetting her stomach. I would bring it to her myself, but, I do not wish to frighten her.”

Will huffed a tired laugh. “Of course you did. You are truly miraculous, Hannibal. I’ll help you take it to her, but I want you to hand it to her yourself. I think it would be helpful for her to see that not all alphas are as cruel as Jacob.”

Hannibal looked for a second like he might want to argue against it, but he swallowed back his words, and bowed his head. “Very well.”

The tray of food that Hannibal prepared was indeed not very spectacular to look at, but it still smelled divine, and reminded Will of how hungry he was. It included a hard boiled egg with salt and pepper flakes, yogurt with berries, and oatmeal elegantly decorated with fruit, cinnamon, and honey. To drink, there was a pot of water, which Hannibal said contained cucumber and lemon.

Will knocked on the door to Abigail's room, and received a quiet, groggy invitation to enter. When he did, he found that the lamp by the bed was lit, while all the many curtains in the room were drawn. Abigail was redressed in a white nightgown with her hair braided and freshly washed. Her fingers were also bandaged, and she was bracketed on each side by brass bed warmers. She turned to face the door at their entry, and her eyes widened ever so slightly at the sight of Hannibal.

Will approached first, and kneeled down at the Princess' bedside. "I'm sure you know, but everything went perfectly fine during the procedure. The fetus had no heartbeat, so you came here at the perfect time. You'll need to regain some strength before you can undergo the surgical procedure to remove your womb, though, if that is still the outcome you desire. In the meantime, Hannibal has made your breakfast this morning. He is a wonderful chef, I'm sure you'll come to find."

Will turned back to look at Hannibal, who was still standing at the door and holding the tray of food. Will nodded at him, and Hannibal approached the bed slowly and carefully as Will helped Abigail up into a sitting position against the headboard. Once she was upright, Hannibal delicately placed the tray over her lap.

"I hope it is to your liking, Princess." The knight's voice was softer than it usually was, and he kept his eyes down towards the bed instead of looking directly into Abigail's. Abigail gave Will a questioning look, and the king nodded.

Abigail looked back to Hannibal, and smiled very, very slightly. "Thank you. This looks better than any meal I have ever eaten."

Hannibal bowed to her, and then stepped back from the bed. Abigail reached forward with a bandaged hand and picked up the spoon, using it to lift up a scoop of oatmeal, and bringing it to her mouth. The second her lips closed around it, her eyes widened.

"Oh… this is… delicious."

Will smiled, and looked back at Hannibal to give him an approving nod, before turning back to Abigail. "See? I told you. If he wasn't my bodyguard, he would be my personal chef."

This made Abigail smile around her mouthful of food. "Thank you." She then looked up at Hannibal, with the smile still on her face. "Both of you."

Hannibal bowed to her again. "Of course."

Will gave Abigail a final pat on the head, and told her that when she was finished, she could set the tray on her nightstand, and a maid would come to collect it. Will and Abigail then left her to finish her meal and rest more, with the two of them walking back to the throne room.

The sun was now cresting above the horizon, and the early wakers of Bailde would be discovering that the exiled prince was still very much alive, and very dangerous.

Upon entering the throne room, the king and knight were startled to find the royal court abuzz with frantic conversation. Will turned to the nearest steward, and asked what was going on.

The steward shook his head, and his tone was laced with fear as he spoke. “Oh, your Highness, it is terrible news! The young daughter of farmer Nichols has been found murdered in her bed!”

Chapter End Notes

Well, everything has finally kicked off. The rest of the fic will continue to contain possibly triggering subject matter, so I advise any readers to please proceed with caution!

The Funeral of Elise Nichols

Chapter Summary

> The investigation begins into the death of Elise Nichols, and the streets of Bailde are empty with the threat of a rogue and murderous prince.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will and Hannibal arrived at the Nichols family farm at a quarter past six. Neither king nor guard had slept for a moment all night, but there could be no rest, not now.

Will was wearing dull white pants, which had tucked into them a flowing green shirt with elegantly engraved buttons, and tall brown boots; all under a light brown cape. Hannibal was still in his chainmail and leather tunic, as well as his blue cape.

They made the journey in a plain black coach, with a small entourage of guards, in order to not disturb the neighboring townspeople or raise too much panic amongst the early morning workers. Greeting them at the Nichols farmhouse was Constable Miriam Lass, an alpha woman who had been appointed to the job by the late King Madadh as one of his last formal decrees on the throne. She bowed to Will at his approach.

“Your majesty, thank you for coming on such short notice. Although, I imagine you have had just as much sleep as I've had tonight, if not less.”

Will motioned for Miriam to stand, and gave her a polite, but un-joyful smile. “All in a day's work, for those of us that are sworn to protect. Now, do you mind telling me, are farmer Nichols and his wife here?”

Miriam nodded, and had Will and Hannibal follow her into the farmhouse, where the aged couple was sitting in the main room, holding each other. Mrs. Nichols looked like she had just finished crying, and Farmer Nichols looked as though his soul had been parted from his body. Also in the room were who Will assumed to be murder victim's siblings.

Will knew the Nichols family. They produced a large chunk of Vilspastai’s wheat, which was a major domestic food source for Will’s people. Farmer Nichols and his wife were both betas, while their oldest daughter, Elise, was an omega.

As Will approached the couch, the Nichols’ jumped in shock upon seeing the King in their home, and began to stand. Will held out his hand to stop them, before taking a knee, and lowering his head to them.

“Please, on behalf of my late father, I would like to extend my condolences, and assure you that you will be compensated and supported by my palace. You will not have to worry about Elise's funeral or burial, nor food or farm repairs, for the entirety of the year-long mourning period. I know that no amount of gold can replace what you have lost, but I at least hope it provides some comfort.”

Mrs. Nichols' eyes once again filled with tears, and Farmer Nichols removed his hat and placed it against his chest.

“Thank you, your Highness, truly. We… understand that this isn't your fault. Please know that.”

Will nodded at the couple, then turned to Elise's siblings and bowed to them as well, before finally turning back to Miriam and Hannibal. He motioned at the two of them with his head, and they returned to the entryway room. Once away from the Nichols’, Will turned his attention back to Miriam.

"Where is her body?”

“In her room, in the second floor. Follow me.” Miriam gestured to Will and Hannibal before turning and walking up the nearby steps. The king and his knight followed closely behind.

The second floor consisted of a large landing with the doors to four rooms, and Miriam walked towards the first one on the left. She opened it, and then stood back. Hannibal entered first, and Will followed. Together, the two of them stared down at the body of Elise Nichols.

Her body was laying on its back in her bed, with her hands placed one over the other on top of her stomach. Her long brown hair was fanned out along her shoulders, and her face and body were clean. The only dirty part was the fabric of her nightgown, which was dark red, and stuck to her lower stomach.

Surrounding the body were several juniper branches, holly, and birch bark, along with some early spring wildflowers. It looked like a traditional Vilspastai burial.

Will approached the bed, and as he stared down at Elise’ serene face, he suddenly felt a powerful aura that forced him to squeeze his eyes shut to prevent overstimulation. It felt like guilt, and it seemed unrelated to his own feelings about his blood brother killing one of his subjects, instead seeming to emanate from the objects surrounding Elise.

Suddenly, Miriam’s voice cut through Will’s thoughts.

“We think the burial decor surrounding her body is some sort of calling card, or maybe even a type of joke he’s pulling. All we know is that Jacob is either trying to give us something to follow, or trying to throw us off of his trail by making the crime look more complex than it is.”

Will shook his head immediately, and Miriam gave him a questioning look.

“It's not a joke, and there's no double meaning. It's guilt. Jacob is trying to apologize for taking Elise’s life by giving her the proper funerary rights.” Will dragged his eyes down Elise’s body, to the bloody stripe along her lower belly. “Was this the wound that killed her?”

Miriam shook her head. “No, she was suffocated. The wound on her stomach is almost like a surgical incision, although a bit less elegant. Our medical examiner is preparing to see if any of her organs are missing.”

Will pulled his eyes away from Elise’s body, and then glanced around the room for few seconds before speaking. “Jacob killed Elise in her own bedroom? That seems quite risky.”

Miriam walked towards Elise's bedroom window, and motioned to the pane, which had visible streaks of blood on it. “We think he smothered her here, in her room, and then took her to a secondary location, where he performed some sort of surgical operation on her corpse before bringing her back.”

Will's eyebrows knitted together. "That's… highly peculiar. To bring her back, I mean. Staying to dissect her is risky, but going through the trouble of hauling her back through a second story window is even riskier. I have a feeling that it wasn't in his original plan to bring her home.”

Miriam looked at Hannibal, who was staring at Will, before turning back to face him. “That's an interesting idea. We’ll consider that in our investigation. Is there… anything else, you'd like to add, your Highness?”

Will suddenly felt a bit bashful, and he directed his head towards the ground as he shook his head. “No, nothing that you and your team hasn't already noticed, I’m sure.”

Ever since Will was little, he had had a strange ability to… understand. Oftentimes it was just an intuition, or a gut feeling too strong to be ignored. Mostly, it involved people. He could always tell when someone was lying, or nervous, or in love, or sad. This didn't just extend to people in the moment, either. He could often tell in the spaces they left behind, what emotions they were feeling. Like if someone set their tea down too hard so it sloshed over the lip and onto the saucer, or a crumpled clean napkin from fidgeting during dinner.

It used to annoy him, having the burden of everyone's emotional baggage thrust upon him. He grew to learn, however, that it was a very vital skill for a politician to have. So valuable in fact, that the Vilspastai Yard had often called him in for what they considered to be more difficult situations, in order to provide more insight.

Miriam gave Will a bow, and her expression didn’t look the least bit annoyed by the king's inexpert opinions. She has always valued Will’s insight, even back to the first case he helped solve, when all the other senior officers obviously thought the teenage son of the king was simply there to live out some grand detective fantasy, before Will’s strange hunches brought up new questions that led to new clues that led to the capture of a young man who had attempted insurance fraud by killing his new wife and burning their home to the ground.

“You know I'm always willing to investigate any ideas you might have, your Majesty. In the meantime, while my team works on taking Elise for an autopsy and getting the word out for

people to remain in their homes, why don't you get some rest? I have a feeling we'll be needing you again, and I want you to be in the best shape possible if you're going to assist a crime investigation."

Will nodded, suddenly feeling, at Miriam's words, like he was holding up the weight of the world using his lower eyelids as a counterbalance. "Well, who am I to disobey an order from an officer of the law? Hannibal, let's head out."

Hannibal turned and gave a polite nod to Miriam, who returned it, before joining Will as the king left Elise's and began back down the stairs. He entered the living room once again, giving a final condolence to Elise's family and assuring them that he would have someone from his palace by soon to work out Elise's affairs, before Hannibal escorted him back out and onto the carriage.

As the horse pulled Will's covered, purposefully humble coach out of the Nichols farm, it began to drizzle, and the breeze turned cold.

"So. you truly believe that Jacob was apologizing to Elise with that display?"

Hannibal's voice was low, barely rising above the sound of raindrops hitting the canvas ceiling of the cab. Will turned his gaze out the window and into the gray morning.

"I do. I can't explain how he feels that way, but I do. From everything my father and Abigail have told me, I assumed he would be erratic and un-calculated, like a wild animal. Now I see, he has inherited our father's heart, and none of his kindness."

Will was startled by the sensation of a warm, heavy hand appearing on his knee. Hannibal's hand. Will looked across to his guard, and saw the other man's maroon eyes filled with an indescribable softness.

"Well, it's a good thing you inherited both."

Will's mouth fell open slightly, and he felt his cheeks get hotter. If he wasn't so exhausted, he would have turned as red as a berry.

How had he never learned how to take a compliment?

Will dropped his eyes to the carriage floor, and Hannibal returned his hand to his lap. "Thank you, Hannibal."

"Of course." Was all the guard said in reply, before turning his attention out the window and to the pale sky. "It looks like this weather is going to stick around. Miriam and her team will have to work hard to gather whatever clues they can before the water gets rid of them."

With his cheeks finally back to ambient temperature, Will too looked out into the steadily increasing downpour. "I have every faith in them."

~

Back at the palace, before returning to his chambers, Will stopped by Abigail's room. The girl was asleep and snoring softly, curled up in Will's old quilts. Her bandaged hands were balled up by her head, and the trays from her breakfast were stacked politely at the foot of the nightstand. Will gave her a kiss on her hair while Hannibal watched from the doorway, before finally being escorted back to his own bed.

There were no intricate buttons or layers in Will's outfit. It was one of his more casual ensembles, with buttons positioned so that he could dress himself. He got to work on them almost as soon as he entered his chambers, only to be stopped by Hannibal, who quickly unbuttoned instead.

"There's no need Hannibal, I won't need the full undressing or bathing, I'm just napping."

Hannibal pulled the shirt off of Will's shoulders, and folded it over his arm. "It's been a long night for both of us. Let me give you the pleasure of not having to undress yourself, while allowing me the pleasure of doing so."

This brought a smile to the corner of Will's lips, which he managed to hide as Hannibal leaned down and patted his knee. Will raised his foot and placed it on Hannibal's leg as his guard began to unbuckle his boots.

"So, I was right. You do gain some sort of enjoyment in taking over the maid's role, from time to time."

Hannibal kept his eyes on his hands as he spoke. "I enjoy my work, which is protecting you, and keeping you safe. I enjoy being able to do these small tasks for you as well, since I can see immediately how you become unburdened and relaxed. It's more of an instant result, compared to my other duties."

Will hummed and nodded. "I see. Well, don't tell any of the maids this, but sometimes I prefer your touch to theirs. They always worry about offending me or making the wrong move or being too rough or too light. You're a bit more… intuitive, in your work."

Hannibal freed Will from his left boot, before gently lifting Will's other foot onto his leg to begin work on the right. "Your words are very flattering, Will. You know I will always assist you with tasks like this, you need only ask."

Will huffed a laugh through his nose. "Right, I'll take my personal knight, and the head of all my guards, for thirty minutes every evening to unlace my slippers and salt my bath. I'm sure he has nothing better he could be doing, like ensuring my safety and that of every member of the palace household."

Will's right foot was free, and he placed back on the ground. Hannibal didn't rise, however. Instead, he began unlacing Will's pants while still kneeled, his eyes level with the king's belly button. He didn't respond until his fingers were in Will's waistband.

"There is no safer place for you than when you are by my side."

He then tugged down, pulling Will's pants to his feet in one seamless movement. Will stepped out of them, and Hannibal gathered them up along with Will's shirt, placing them both in the laundry chute just to the side of the door. Will walked over to his bed and climbed into it, making himself comfortable just as Hannibal returned to ensure that all the king's blankets were tucked in and positioned correctly. Once he was satisfied, he pulled back, and looked down at Will.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Will shook his head. “No thank you, that will be all.”

Hannibal nodded, but did not move. He continued staring down at Will for a few seconds, before sighing, and saying, “I hate to inform you of this during such a… turbulent time, but I believe you will soon be entering a heat.”

Will immediately squeezed his eyes shut, and suppressed a long suffering sigh. “Fantastic. Perfect timing, as always.”

Hannibal’s voice continued despite the darkness that now surrounded Will’s vision.

“If I’m smelling it now, then you still have about half a month until it begins. That should be more than enough time to resolve the issue if Jacob.”

Will peeked an eye open and stared up at his guard. “Your faith in my investigative abilities is awe inspiring, Hannibal, truly.”

This made Hannibal smile just a bit more. “It’s not just my faith in your abilities, it’s my faith in you as a whole.”

Will rolled his eyes, and repressed the urge to crawl beneath the quilts until he was completely hidden from view. Hannibal seemed to sense this, and he bent over Will’s nightstand to blow out his lamp, before standing upright and grabbing the tassel that hung near the corner of Will’s bedframe.

“Goodnight, Will. I’ll wake you if anything urgent happens.”

Will sighed. “Make sure you're getting some help as well. If I’m going to be out and about while this close to a heat, I want you by my side.”

Will saw Hannibal's silhouette stiffen for a second, before his normal demeanor returned so quickly that Will wondered if he had imagined it.

“Understood. I will do my best to do just that, then.”

Will yawned and closed his eyes, snuggling down into the warm quilts surrounding him. “Goodnight.”

Hannibal didn’t move for a few seconds, before Will heard the sound of the tassel being pulled, followed by the darkness on the other side of his eyelids growing even another shade as the curtains surrounding the bed frame fell into place.

Despite his exhaustion, Will stayed awake until Hannibal finished blowing out the other two lit lamps in his room, and making his way out of the king's chambers.

Will did not fall asleep until after he heard the lock slip into place.

~

"Father… are you sure this is okay? I won't… hurt him?"

A seven year old Will stood before King Madadh and Hannibal, the latter of whom was kneeling in front of Will. He looked almost sick, with flushed skin and bloodshot eyes. It made Will feel worried.

King Madadh gave his son a kind look, and reached out to place a comforting hand on the young prince's shoulder.

"Of course, he won't feel a thing, but this is something need to do to help Hannibal do his job even better. Do you understand?"

Will looked up at his father, then back at Hannibal. The older boy forced a smile. "I'll be okay, your Highness. Trust me."

Will gulped, and gave one last look at his father, who nodded.

Will stepped towards Hannibal, approaching him until he was level with the other boy's neck. The knight in training had his head to the side, and Will could see the other boy's pulse. It was very fast.

Before he could lose his nerve, Will leaned down, and bit into Hannibal's neck. Hannibal didn't make a sound, but his shoulders did tense. Will kept biting down, until he tasted blood, just like his father had instructed him to. The second the metallic taste hit his tongue, he reeled back and bent down so that Hannibal's downturned eyes met his.

"Are you okay, Hannibal? Did I hurt you?"

The older boy was still sweating, but he looked visibly less tense. He shook his head, and smiled. "No, not at all. Your father was right."

Later, when Will was just a bit older, and could conprehend the complexities of alpha and omega biology, he realized what he had done.

An incomplete mating, a tool used primarily in royal households, to create a stronger bond between a knight and their charge. Hannibal was just on the verge of going into his first fertile rutt, and when Will bit him, he had bonded Hannibal to him. This made Hannibal uniquely attuned to Will's scent, meaning he could always find him, and he could always tell when Will was about to enter a heat, which was an incredibly useful ability due to how irregular Will's heats were when compared to that of other omegas.

Of course, if he really wanted to, Hannibal could always bond to someone else. All it would take is being in rutt and having a different omega bite him. But, he had never shown any

interest in bonding with anyone else, nor stopping the rutt suppressants he was put on soon after that first bite.

Despite Will's many assurances over the years that he would never keep Hannibal bonded to him if he found someone he truly loved, Hannibal had never said anything besides, "Being bonded to you helps me keep you safe, and that is my only goal in this life."

Sometimes, when Hannibal wasn't as fully dressed, and was without his cape, Will could still see the faded outline of his teeth on Hannibal's neck.

~

"Will… Will, how are you feeling?"

Will was gently roused by Hannibal's familiar, calming voice. His room was still dark, which meant the curtains were drawn. Distantly, he heard thunder.

"Yes… yes, I'm fine. How long have I been asleep?"

"No longer than four hours. Not nearly as much as I would have liked to let you rest, but we've received an urgent message from Constable Lass."

Will sat up in bed, and Hannibal lit the lamp on his nightstand, casting the room in a haunting, orange glow. Thunder boomed outside again, followed by a flash of lightning.

"What did the message say?"

Only half of Hannibal's face was visible in the dancing light of the lamp, but Will could see just enough to notice the concern lines around the knight's eyes.

"They've made a discovery in the autopsy of Elise. She's missing no organs, however, her liver had been removed from her body before being put back. Her liver was… well… sick. It contained a tumor."

All at once, Will was very, very awake.

~

Will arrived at Vilspastai Yard's medical headquarters at noon. The streets were empty except for royal and city guards. Every window was shuttered and the mats were pulled inside. Will had never seen Bailde so deserted, but it was at least a sign that his subjects had heard his and Lass' warnings, and were acting accordingly.

Will and Hannibal were ushered into the autopsy room by Lass, where there were no doctors in sight. She pulled on a pair of freshly cleaned gloves, and waved the two men over to the exam table where Elise was laying. Without further pleasantries, she began her spiel.

"As you can see with this cut, it's very surgical, almost professional. We believe that Jacob knew exactly the organ he desired from her, and so when he saw that it was sick, he returned it, and her."

Miriam looked up at Will, who was staring down at the scar on Elise's lower abdomen. As he looked, he noticed something around the edges of the long red smile.

“Those particles surrounding the wound, what are they?”

Miriam's eyebrows rose. “Oh! That, yes, we noticed it, too. We think it's some sort of debri or dirt left over from his tools or the area he took her before bringing her back.”

Will shook his head. “Then why was the rest of her so clean? Why not clean her wound, too?”

Miriam looked stunned for a second, before turning and grabbing a small towel from one of the shelves behind her. Delicately, she ran a corner of the towel along the edge of Elise’s wound.

The particles stuck quickly to the fabric of the towel, and left no residue on Elise’s skin. Miriam held the towel up between the three of them, and before Will could lean in and attempt to identify the strange substance, Hannibal was already speaking.

“Antler velvet.”

Will and Miriam snapped their heads in Hannibal's direction. Miriam then looked down at the particles on the towel, and let out a shocked gasp. “I… think you're right.”

Hannibal seemed a bit bashful, but still, he continued. “It's an old remedy from many years ago, to help wound healing. It does work, although not effectively as stitches, soap, and water.”

Will couldn't help but smile at his knight, and give him a pat on the shoulder. “That's brilliant, Hannibal. I never would have guessed.”

Miriam seemed less pleased with Hannibal’s deduction, as if all of her investigative guesses had just been torn up and thrown on the ground right in front of her. “I… I don't understand. Why would he try to heal her wounds, knowing she was already dead? There aren't enough deer in the world to produce enough velvet to resurrect someone.”

Will knew Miriam was right. The funerary decor made sense to Will, it was part of Jacob’s guilt. But this went beyond guilt. It was almost bordering on…

“Love.” Will spoke his final thought out loud, and both Hannibal and Miriam turned to give him dual looks of confusion. Before he could give a chance for either of them to become worried about possible sleep-deprivation induced insanity, Will continued.

“The guilt I was feeling, it wasn't because he felt guilty for killing Elise. He felt guilty because he could not honor her death the way he had planned. Her liver, he wanted it, but it was diseased. He couldn't use a diseased liver, so he had to put it back, but that would have made her death a waste. So, he gave her her last rights, and since he couldn't bring her back, he at least wanted to show how sorry he was for hurting her. He… loved her. No, no, not Elise. He loves…”

Will looked down at Elise. Her hair was long and dark brown, her lips were small, and her eyebrows were thin. There was just one thing…

“Miriam, could you open one of Elise’s eyes for me?”

Miriam looked a bit apprehensive, but she did as she was asked, and used a gloved hand to gently open Elise's right eye. It was dark blue, like the deepest part of the ocean. Will sucked in a tense breath.

“Abigail. He loves Abigail, but he couldn't get to her, so he used Elise.”

Will could feel Miriam and Hannibal’s eyes on him like something physical. He was aware of how his tone had changed at the end of his sentence, filled with a pure and flawless anger that was uncharacteristic of him. Miriam closed Elise’s eye, and took a step back from the autopsy table.

“Your Majesty, if that’s true, then… until we find him, or he finds Abigail, there are many girls in and around Bailde who are going to be in danger.”

Will squeezed his eyes shut and placed a palm against his forehead. “I know, I know. We… we have to find him.”

Hannibal had stepped to Will’s side, and had an arm over his shoulder before Will could realize his eyes had begun to fill with tears of rage. Seeing the king’s break in composure, Miriam’s hackles visibly lowered, and she walked around the other side of the autopsy table to stand in front of the two men.

“Listen… I can’t imagine how hard this is for you. I know this is never anything you could have ever imagined dealing with so soon after your coronation, but, if it makes you feel any better, at least here, nobody blames you for any of this.”

Will managed to swallow back his tears as he gave a genial nod in Miriam’s direction. “Thank you, Constable Lass.”

Miriam gave Will a tight lipped smile, and removed her leather gloves, tossing them into a pile meant for the laundry room. “Well, I need to get a word out to the paper to update their information on Jacob. Any household with a teenaged or young adult female omega should be on high alert. Your Highness, could you and Hannibal wait in my office for a bit? I have something I want to discuss with you before you leave.”

Will nodded, but kept silent, and he and Hannibal were shown out of the room by a different officer, who walked them down a long, dim hallway to Lass’s office.

The office was square and brown, with bookshelves lining the walls and a desk so messy that Will wondered how Miriam could find a single quill amongst all the empty pots and crumbled papers.

In front of the desk were two comfy, dull colored chairs, where Will and Hannibal took their seats.

It wasn't long after the door to the office was closed that Hannibal spoke.

“That was quite a deduction you made back there, but, it does make sense. Jacob is a vile, rabid animal who needs to be put down, but, even animals love their young.”

Will scoffed bitterly. “If this is his idea of an act of love, than I'm even more scared of what an act of rage from him might entail.”

Hannibal stayed silent for a few seconds, a calculated move whenever Will began to pass a boiling point. The silence allowed Will’s emotions to level out, where he could enter back into a rational state of mind before containing a conversation.

There was a clock somewhere in Miriam’s office, and it was ticking. It ticked twenty times before Will sighed, and spoke.

“I don't know what came over me back there. I was so angry, Hannibal.”

Hannibal leaned forward in his seat, and placed his hand over Will’s, where it rested on the arm of his chair.

“You have every right to be. Jacob has disregarded your father's mercy, attempted to ruin the purity of a young girl, and successfully took the life of another. I’d be surprised if you weren’t seeing red when thinking about him.”

This made a small, sad smile appear on Will’s face. “Thank you, Hannibal, but this case requires me to have the utmost concentration. I can't let another girl die like that. I don't want him to find what he’s looking for.”

Hannibal squeezed Will’s hand. “He won’t."

The door behind the two men opened, and Hannibal quickly and gently removed his hand from Will’s. The king pretended like he didn’t immediately miss it.

Miriam entered, carrying what looked like a piece of paper under her arm. She quickly walked behind her desk and sat down, placing the paper face down in front of her.

“So, I looked at the description we were given of Abigail, and it has come to my attention that she matches the description of a little girl who went missing sixteen years ago, by the name of Abigail Hobbs.”

Miriam turned the paper over, and Will and Hannibal both rose slightly from the seat to view it. Upon seeing the sketch of the young girl Miriam had brought with her, Will's mouth dropped open. The resemblance to his Abigail was admittedly uncanny.

“Abigail Hobbs’ parents, Garret and Louise, are an alpha male and beta female couple. Their daughter, Abigail, went missing not long after her third birthday. She had not presented yet, so her secondary sex is unknown. The Hobbs family are hunters by trade, and so they lived mostly independently some twenty miles outside of Bailde. It was believed that she had gone into the woods near their house and gotten lost, succumbing to the elements, or wildlife.”

Will sat back down in his chair, and shook his head. “Or, she was taken by Jacob in the night, like how he took Elise.”

Miriam had a dark look on her face as she responded. “That is what we are looking into presently, yes. The Hobbs have not been notified of the possibility that Abigail might be their daughter, we were waiting on you to see the sketch first, and decide from there.”

Will reached out and snagged the sketch from Miriam's desk, making her jump. He looked down at the drawing, which was a perfect catalog of all of Abigail’s features, recited from memory by either her mother or her father. Will had grown an immense fondness for the girl, and had grown used to the idea of having another living member of his family in the palace with him. He didn't want her to leave, but, he could not imagine denying her her true family.

“Send the notice. Tell them I would like to meet them soon, and to standby on notice of my visitation, likely with Abigail at my side. I will first have to ensure she is well enough for the journey.”

Miriam nodded understandably as Will returned the sketch to her cluttered desk. “Of course, I’ll have a letter prepared for them immediately. That concludes my questions for you, for now, at least. Is there anything I can do for you, your Majesty?”

Will shook his head and stood up from the chair, with Hannibal quickly mirroring his movements. “No, that will be all.”

Miriam walked the two men back to the coach outside. There was a break in the storm, but the midday sun was still entirely blocked out by thick, heavy looking clouds, and a darkness on the horizon heralded even more downpours for the foreseeable future. By the time the coach pulled through the palace gates again, thunder was booming in the distance.

Upon entering the castle, a maid eagerly informed Will that the Princess was in the dining room enjoying her lunch. At the mention of a meal, Will’s stomach audibly growled, and Hannibal steered the king into the dining room.

Abigail jumped at their entry, a fork held halfway up to her mouth. Upon seeing Will and Hannibal, however, she smiled widely, and motioned to the chairs nearest her.

“You haven't eaten either, right? Please, they made so much that I can't eat it all by myself.” The girl was still in her nightclothes, and her fingers had been rebandaged anew. She also looked even cleaner, like the maids had given her an extra bath before lunch. Seeing her smiling and clean and eating made Will’s heart swell, and he quickly took a seat at her right side, while Hannibal sat to her left.

Hannibal immediately busied himself with pouring Will’s tea, and plating him a slice of lamb pie. Will asked Abigail what she had been up to, and allowed himself a few slightly ravenous bites as she recounted getting her hair rebraided, her nails cleaned, and her lunch order taken. Will made a mental note to increase his maid’s bonuses for the solstice Holiday.

Will cast a look at Hannibal, and Hannibal returned it, before turning his attention to a plate of cold salad near the end of the table. As he scooped a helping of it into the corner of

Abigail's plate, Will cleared his throat.

"I'm happy you're regaining your strength. I want your focus to remain on healing and resting for as long as you need, however, something has recently been brought to my attention that I wouldn't feel right in keeping from you."

The smile dropped from Abigail's face, and Will felt a painful tug at his heart. "What's happened?"

Will sighed. "Abigail, how much do you remember from your childhood? More specifically, how far back does your memory go?"

Abigail's eyes fell away from Will's, and she gripped her fork tightly. She sat in this position for several seconds before shaking her head and saying, "My first memory is with my dad, down by the creek near our cabin. I was young… maybe about… three or four?"

Will reached out to Abigail, and placed a hand over her wrist. Her grip on the fork loosened. "Alright, that's perfectly fine. I wanted you to know that the constable has brought to my attention the case of a young girl who went missing from her family's homestead sixteen years ago. Her name was Abigail as well, and you fit her description. I saw the sketch of her, and I have to admit the resemblance is uncanny. The constable would like you to meet with the parents of the missing girl, to see if, maybe…."

Abigail dropped the fork, and took in a deep breath. "Maybe they're my parents?"

Will moved his hand down to Abigail's, and held it. "Maybe, yes. But I want you to know that even if you and I share no blood relation, you have a place in my court, and you will never want for anything again as long as you live. You are now and forever under my protection."

A tear dropped down onto Abigail's pale cheek. "I… I want to meet them. How soon can I?"

"It's a bit of a journey. They live 20 miles from Bailde, and the terrain is rough. I'll want to have Doctor Parr confirm your ability, but if she does, we can make the trip as soon as possible."

Abigail nodded, and wiped at her eyes. "Alright. I understand. Thank you."

Will have Abigail's hand a squeeze, before letting go, and leaning back into his seat. Hannibal poured him a glass of tea, while turning to Abigail to say, "That salad has plenty of vegetables with important nutrients in them. I recommend that you consume a fair portion of it."

Abigail gave the knight a small smile. "Understood."

The three ate their meal, and Will told Abigail stories and legends passed down through Vilspastai for generations. Hannibal ate in silence, his eyes going between Will and Abigail while they spoke. Listening. Thinking.

Planning.

~

Hours had passed since lunch. He had dined with Will for tea and dinner, and then said his good nights to both the king and Abigail, before returning to his quarters.

Hannibal's room was on the same wing as Will's but a floor below. He bowed to the night guards as he entered, and turned out all the lamps, and ran the bath. After an hour passed, the palace was quiet, and Hannibal changed into civilian clothes, and threw a brown hood over his head, before hauling himself out the window and down a stretch of vines.

Hannibal took a horse from the palace stables. A plain, short brown one, that was mostly used for garden work. He rode the shoddy animal down the palace road and into town, just as the last streetlight was snuffed out.

Hannibal tied the horse in an alley near the town gates, and kept to the shadows as he slunked from back street to back street, before finally coming upon his target.

The Lone Wolf tavern was situated in a rundown and sketchy part of Bailde. It was so late that even the bars and brothels were closing, after a day of what Hannibal assumed was pitiful traffic. He watched from across the street as a young woman with a scent like liquor and sweat said goodbye to another woman, and began the walk back to her home alone.

When the streets were bare, Hannibal followed. He stuck to the darkness, and kept his steps light. When the young woman stood in front of the cracked steps to her apartment, she reached into a large bag she was carrying on her elbow, and began to fish around for a key. It was then that Hannibal lept from the shadows, and dragged her into them.

The woman screamed against Hannibal's palm and tried to kick at him, but a swift punch to her abdomen left her gasping for air, and ragdolling against Hannibal's chest.

Hannibal smoothed down her dark hair, and tsked into her ear. "You've lived a most ungraceful life. Why not show a little dignity now, in your last moments?"

The girl cried against Hannibal's hand, and Hannibal removed a silver dagger from his sleeve. She saw it glinting in the moonlight, and once again tried in vain to struggle free.

Hannibal stabbed the dagger into her ribcage, aiming for the lung. The girl's muffled scream was gargled.

"Your name is Cassie Boyle, you're twenty four years old, you're an omega, you live alone, and you have no children. I know who you are, child of Vilspastai. Rejoice that your death has served its purpose, and may the Wolf Mother welcome you back into his glade of tears."

The girl choked, and her eyes fluttered shut as all her muscles went lax. Hannibal kept the dagger in Cassie's side, and hauled her up and over his shoulder, as he made his way back the way he came.

~

Will was awoken before his usual wake up time by Hannibal. The guard was already fully dressed, and he donned a grim expression.

“Will, I wish that I could give you a good morning greeting, but I’m afraid this morning has already proven itself to be quite difficult.”

Will stood up from his bed, and stretched. He still didn't feel fully rested, but he figured that it was a feeling he was going to become very familiar with as king.

“Well, no use in delaying it to preserve my good mood. What's the news?”

Hannibal nervously palmed the hilt of his sword as he replied, “Another young girl’s body was found this morning, in one of the farms just outside of Bailde. All we know so far is that she was a resident of the city, and that her corpse has been posed in a very… interesting way.”

Will’s blood felt thick and cold at the realization that in such a short span of time, his own brother had managed to harm another innocent victim. “Interesting how?”

Hannibal sighed. “Constable Lass did not go into details in her message. She just gave us the address, and told us to arrive urgently.”

Will looked towards the boots that he had kicked off before falling into bed yesterday. “I guess you should tell the maids that I’ll be dressing myself again today.”

~

Will and Hannibal arrived at the scene, and were immediately greeted by Constable Lass, as well as a large murder of crows that had gathered around the body, and were currently waiting for the human nuisances to leave so they could enjoy what surely promised to be a decadent meal.

Cassie had been stripped naked, with her abdomen opened on her left side. She was then impaled upon a rack of antlers, that was still attached to the decapitated head of a deer. It has already sunk into the new mud some ways, which meant that it had been there for what Will assumed to be at least a few hours.

It was very early morning, with the sun just beginning to turn the sky from dark blue to a pale purple. As Will approached the body, he immediately felt off. The scene has an entirely different feeling than the one from the previous day.

“There's no guilt here.” Will spoke his thoughts out loud, and Miriam jumped at Will’s unexpected words, before quickly turning her attention to a notepad, which she began to write in.

“No guilt? What do you mean by that?”

Will got even closer to the body, and the crows got louder, fearing that their meal was being threatened. “He didn't feel bad about killing her. He isn't honoring her like he honored Elise. She’s naked instead of clothed, she’s out in the elements instead of safe in bed, and instead of

trying to heal the wounds he has inflicted on her, he inflicted even more posthumously. I… don't think this is Jacob's work."

Every nearby officer immediately began to shift uncomfortably. Miriam looked up from her notepad, and paused her writing. "Are you sure? She has very similar features to both Elise and Abigail, and there are no active murderers in Vilspastai that we know of other than-"

"I know all of that." Will's tone as as sharp and steel, and Miriam swallowed the rest of her sentence. "I know, and I'm telling you, you have another killer on your hands, because this isn't Jacob's work. What else do you know about this girl, other than the fact that she lives in the city?"

Miriam sighed, and dropped her notebook down to her side. "Her name is Cassie Boyle, a prostitute at the Lone Wolf tavern. Omega, aged twenty four."

Will's eyes widened. "That's it. This can't be Jacob, he's been going for omega women who have just entered their fertile heat period. Cassie was older, and far from virginal. She may be similar in appearance, but Jacob would have been able to smell the difference in her pheromones, and wouldn't have been interested in her."

Miriam stared at Will for a moment, and then slowly brought her notepad back up, and began to write in it again. Will turned to the closest person nearby wearing a medical badge, and asked, "Do we know if any organs were taken from that scar in her side?"

The medical worker first bowed at the King's address, before replying, "Yes, although we aren't sure of the full extent, it was quite easy to discover that at the very least, both of her lungs are missing."

Will's eyebrows raised. "Her lungs…"

Just then, a wave of new realizations hit Will all at once, making him stagger. Hannibal quickly stabilized him as Will held onto his head, letting the emotions overtake and swarm him.

"Jacob wanted to take Elise's liver… but he couldn't. He put it back, because he noticed a tumor. He was going to use it for something, but it was diseased. You… can't eat… diseased meat."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Check the updated tags list :).

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